Spotlight
by CeFEO

Can farming families inspire a richer, more grounded understanding of entrepreneurship?

A review of 76 studies reveals how identity, family, and institutions shape agricultural entrepreneurship

SARAH FITZ-KOCH · MATTIAS NORDQVIST · SARA CARTER · ERIK HUNTER

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Entrepreneurship research overwhelmingly focuses on tech startups, high-growth ventures, and urban ecosystems. Agriculture barely registers. Yet farming families have been blending tradition with adaptation for centuries—navigating regulatory complexity, managing intergenerational transitions, and developing new products and markets under constraints that most startup founders would find unimaginable. If entrepreneurship theory claims to be context-sensitive, agriculture is the test case it has largely ignored.

This systematic review of **76 empirical articles published between 1980 and 2015** maps the landscape of entrepreneurship research in agriculture. The authors draw from entrepreneurship studies, rural sociology, and agricultural economics to identify what drives entrepreneurial activity in this sector and what outcomes it produces. Three contextual themes emerge as dominant: identity, family, and institutions.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The authors organized the literature along two dimensions: whether studies examined the *antecedents* of entrepreneurship (what leads to it) or its *outcomes* (what results from it), and whether the analysis focused on individuals, households and firms, or the broader environment. This two-dimensional typology revealed that research clusters around certain cells—individual antecedents are well studied, while environmental outcomes remain almost untouched—and that three contextual themes cut across all categories.

The review does not test hypotheses. It synthesizes a scattered, multidisciplinary body of work into a coherent framework and identifies where future research is most needed.

KEY INSIGHTS

Identity shapes which opportunities farmers pursue

Agricultural entrepreneurs rarely separate their business identity from their personal one. Farmers see themselves simultaneously as stewards of land, community members, family providers, and—sometimes reluctantly—business owners. This identity shapes the kinds of ventures they are willing to pursue. Diversification into agri-tourism, artisanal production, or farm-based education feels authentic because it extends the existing identity. Jumping into unrelated ventures does not. The research consistently shows that identity-driven entrepreneurship in agriculture prioritizes meaning and sustainability over pure financial return—a pattern that resonates in any sector where founders' personal values are deeply entangled with the business.

Family is not background context—it is the entrepreneurial actor

In agriculture, the family is not just the owner of the business. It is the labor force, the decision-making unit, the capital source, and the knowledge repository. Entrepreneurial activity emerges from household-level strategies shaped by marriage, succession timing, children's education, and retirement planning. The review finds that entrepreneurship in farming is best understood as a family system process—where

individual ambition interacts with collective resources and constraints. This reframes the standard entrepreneurship narrative, which tends to center on the individual founder, and offers a model that applies broadly to any family-driven enterprise.

Institutional complexity is both a barrier and a catalyst

Agriculture may be the most institutionally regulated sector in any economy. EU subsidies, land use regulations, environmental standards, trade agreements—farmers operate within a dense web of formal rules. But informal institutions matter at least as much: community norms about acceptable land use, professional networks, cultural expectations about what a "good farmer" does. The literature shows that successful agricultural entrepreneurs are those who can navigate, interpret, and occasionally challenge these institutional pressures. Some policies enable entrepreneurship (innovation grants, diversification subsidies); others suppress it (rigid land use regulations, risk-averse lending criteria). Institutional literacy—the ability to read and work the system—emerges as a distinct entrepreneurial capability.

TAKEAWAYS

Treat identity as a strategic compass

Entrepreneurial ventures that align with the founder's core identity are more sustainable and more likely to attract authentic stakeholder support. For family businesses in any sector, clarifying what the business stands for—not just what it sells—provides a filter for evaluating new opportunities.

Recognize family as a strategic resource, not just an emotional one

Family members contribute labor, knowledge, networks, and capital. Mapping these resources explicitly—rather than taking them for granted—turns implicit advantages into deliberate strategic assets. This is especially relevant during generational transitions, when resource configurations shift.

Develop institutional literacy

Understanding the formal and informal rules that govern your sector is itself a competitive advantage. Entrepreneurs who can identify which policies support innovation, which create barriers, and how to influence both are better positioned to create and capture value.

IMPACT

This review makes a case for agriculture as a theoretically rich context for entrepreneurship research—not a peripheral one. The three themes it identifies (identity, family, institutions) are not unique to farming; they are universal dimensions of entrepreneurial activity that happen to be most visible in agricultural settings, where the personal, familial, and institutional are deeply intertwined. The paper's contribution is both methodological (providing a structured map of a fragmented literature) and theoretical (arguing that context-sensitive entrepreneurship theory must engage with sectors like agriculture if it is to claim generalizability).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Use identity as a venture filter.** Before pursuing a new opportunity, ask whether it aligns with the business's core identity and the family's values. Ventures that feel authentic are more likely to sustain commitment over time.
2. **Map family resources explicitly.** Identify what each family member contributes—skills, networks, capital, emotional support—and build strategy around those assets rather than treating them as invisible.
3. **Conduct an institutional mapping exercise.** Classify the formal and informal rules affecting your sector into enabling versus constraining forces. Develop strategies to leverage the former and navigate the latter.
4. **Engage younger generations early.** Structured mentoring and gradual responsibility help next-generation members develop both capability and a sense of ownership—key ingredients for entrepreneurial identity formation.

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CEFEO AUTHORS



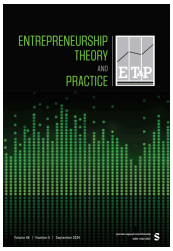
Mattias Nordqvist

Professor

Jönköping International Business School

mattias.nordqvist@ju.se

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