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The nature of farm succession in three New South Wales communities

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Abstract. Farm transfer between generations of the same family has long been considered a highly significant aspect of rural ideology in Australia with major ramifications for farm management decision making. However, the importance attached to family farm succession has been increasingly questioned in current literature. Results from a study in rural culture in New South Wales support the contention that succession is declining in importance, highlighting instead that the wellbeing and education of younger family members is being placed ahead of expectations that children will automatically take over their parents' property and remain in farming. Implications of this trend for farm management are flagged and directions for further research explored.

Keywords: farming families, succession, social sustainability

Introduction

A distinctive culture has long been considered an integral part of Australian agriculture. In this culture, farm labour is provided almost solely by family members, usually but not only men, and the farm is passed onto the next generation, then the next, in perpetuity. Farming tradition asserts that farmers are 'born not made'. Farming is a way of life, not just a job. Decisions are made with the view of ensuring the farm's ongoing economic viability on behalf of the succeeding child, and if more than one child wished to remain on the land, money needs to be saved to expand the existing enterprise or to purchase additional land (Symes 1972; Hastings 1984; Crow 1986; Champaign and Maresca 1987; Gasson and Errington 1993). This continuity also reflects patriarchy in that usually a farm is only passed on to male successors (see for example, Voyce 1994).

The emphasis on succession and continuity, the process and outcomes of transferring the farm between generations of family members, may have served the early farmers well, but now, with the questioning of the long-term sustainability of Australian farming

in an environment of changing gender relationships, globalisation and deteriorating physical resources, the sociological literature (including Gray 1991; Bartlett 1993; Gray et al 1993; Gamble et al 1995; Gray and Phillips 1996; Kaine et al. 1997; Stayner 1997 and 2000; Alston 2000; Gray and Lawrence 2001) one must ask whether the emphasis on continuity in family farming evidenced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continues.

Answering this question is the focal point of this paper. The paper commences with brief overview of the project from which the data presented here are derived, and the means by which the data were collected. It then presents the research findings into the nature and significance of succession and continuity in the study communities, encompassing a discussion of family goals, planning for the future, the reasons why some parents would like children to return to the farm, and why many other parents are actively against their children remaining in farming. It also considers a variety of other issues arising in the succession process. The paper concludes with a discussion of the cultural change that is evidenced in the data, limitations

of the study and avenues for further research.

Methodology

The discussion of this question draws upon data collected in a study of farming culture in three farming communities in the Central West of New South Wales. The study was designed to explore the significance of family continuity and succession, alongside other aspects of culture including religious beliefs, the importance of community, and gender roles.

The three communities of Yongala, Crystal Brook and Glenowen¹ were chosen in the first instance because of their representativeness of mixed farming districts in the Central West of New South Wales (based on data from the 1996 census (ABS 1997)). The communities had to be close enough to the writer's own farming property to facilitate accessibility, but sufficiently distant for the writer to be seen as a comparative 'outsider'.

Given the personal nature of the issues under investigation the use of face-to-face semi-structured interviews was deemed the most appropriate means of obtaining information from farm family members. Such a technique has been utilized extensively in numerous studies of this nature in Australia (for example Gray 1991; Alston, 1995; Phillips 1998) and overseas (Salamon 1992; Elder and Conger 2000), often in conjunction with participant observation. Their advantages include their ability to focus on individuals and families, their ability to focus on what people do and how they live, and how they relate to others, and their potential to be very personal and revealing about the person or the family.

A total of 85 farms were contacted, with members of 55% of farm households agreeing to participate in the interview process. Overall, 73 interviews were

carried out with members of farming families, 37 males and 36 females. Just under half of those interviewed were people whom the researcher had met during earlier visits to the communities. The remainder were contacted by letter then by phone, their names having first been obtained from local council landholder maps.

The interviews were carried out, with one exception, in the homes of the respondents. They were noted by hand then transcribed in full. The average length of an interview was between 2 and 3 hours; the shortest lasted 55 minutes, the longest, over 6 hours.

Description of the study areas

The study areas surround three centres of population, Artherton, with a population of approximately 5,000, and the smaller townships of Yongala (population 317) and Crystal Brook (population 297). All three communities are located between four and six hours from Sydney, and are within an hour and a half's drive of two larger centres, both with populations of over 30,000.

Climatic and soil conditions in the study areas make the three communities suitable for the production of a wide range of dryland crops (particularly wheat, canola and grain legumes) and for the grazing of sheep (medium-fine wool merinos and prime lambs) and cattle. Crystal Brook is surrounded largely by grazing enterprises whilst mixed farming predominates the Yongala and Glenowen districts.

Results and discussion

Farm structure

At the most fundamental level, the significance of the 'family' in farming in the study areas was indicated in the type of business arrangement under which the farm was operating. All but two business entities were being operated as family businesses in one form or another. The dominant business structure was the family partnership

¹ Names have been altered to protect the identities of communities and individuals.

(63.4%), followed by family trusts (13.3%) and family companies (11.1%).

A high percentage (41.5%) of these arrangements were operated as husband and wife partnerships, with all but three of the remainder involving more complex arrangements between parents, children, spouses and siblings.

Farm size

The size of farms owned by the study's participants are documented in table 1.

Table 1 Size of farms

<i>Ha.</i>	<i>Number of farms</i>
Less than or = to 500	10
501-1000	19
1001-2000	27
2001-3000	1
Over 3000	9

Children on the family farm

Children were particularly significant members of the vast majority of respondent farm households. Five households had no children (two of these households comprised single men) but the remainder (89%) had had least one child. Three children was the most common family size (31.1%), followed by two children (26.7%). However, by today's standards, large families were common, with 24.4% of families having at least four children. These figures correspond closely to the region's results in the 1996 census (ABS 1997), highlighting the higher proportion of the population under the age of 14 in the study area compared to state and national figures.

Fifty-five percent of those interviewed had no children working on the farm on anything other than a casual basis. Given that the majority of children were still of school age or younger, this was not unexpected. Only one respondent indicated a child (a son) aged under 20 was working full-time on the family farm. The remaining teenagers were undertaking secondary or tertiary studies

(either at university or TAFE), or working in other employment.

Goals for the family

When asked about the goals respondents had for their family, their replies focused on ensuring their children were happy, 'well adjusted', and equipped to survive the many pressures their parents believed they would experience in life. One mother observed:

Society has degenerated. They must make life-changing decisions I didn't have to make. Being able to say no. They're faced with peer pressures, greater stress, unemployment, despondent, suicidal. Lots of society pressures (Female, 40s).

Despite these common themes, differences did emerge between those indicating they had strong religious beliefs, and those who identified themselves as having few or no religious beliefs.

Members of the latter two groups made responses not unlike the following. One mother, with only male children, was focusing her hopes on "growing them up to be independent strong men" (Female, 40s). Some were more specific, in two cases equating happiness with "being happily married". Others identified education as the most important outcome. This perceived need for a 'good' education was, for these families, a prime motivator for increasing the productivity and profitability of the farming business:

If you want to send them to [private school] you can only have two [children]. To have enough money to look after kids properly. Give them the opportunities to see something else and choose to come back if they want (Female, 30s).

They're grown up now. They'll set their own goals. We gave

them the best education possible (Female, 60s).

The goals of parents identifying themselves as having strong religious beliefs were quite different from those above; all were expressed in strongly religious language. The responses below were typical:

We hope and pray that all the children will be Christian and maintain those standards - that they'll adhere to their upbringing (Male, 50s).

[My goal for my children is that] they all believe in God (Female, 60s).

Of particular note, not a single response incorporated any mention of desiring children to stay in farming (there was *no* mention of continuity at all); indeed, none of the 'goals' were related to farming. Furthermore, while the entry of older respondents into farming was often viewed as a result of having farming 'in the blood' or in terms of a 'calling' these emphases were not apparent when talking of the younger generations. It is a view of farming's future that cannot be ignored.

Thinking about succession

A focal point in the literature is the process and outcomes of succession - how respondents perceive it, why it is important to them, and the difficulties it can cause within the family. Australian research indicates there is a lack of awareness of succession issues (see Gamble et al 1995 for example) and the researcher's discussions with rural financial and other counsellors during the research supported this belief. However, the study reported here indicated a high level of awareness regarding succession but little or no concern over the issues themselves.

Overall, 74% percent of respondents indicated they had given thought to the long term of their farm. Statistical analysis of data was limited by the

sample size and could establish no clear relationships between education, age, or gender and thinking about succession. Those indicating religious affiliation or interest were more likely to think about succession than those who termed themselves non-religious; numbers were too small to determine if the relationship was of statistical significance. Anecdotal evidence suggested this consideration of succession reflected a relationship between apparently high levels of family cohesion and more traditional gender roles in religious families, and plans for succession. That is, issues of farm division between sons and daughters did not arise under the taken-for-grantedness of traditional gender relations, where daughters could not be farmers nor inherit the farm. However, these possibilities do not explain the importance some religious and non-religious respondents place on keeping the farm in the family.

There were exceptions to the broad conclusions outlined above. Three extended families indicated they were experiencing grave difficulties in planning and implementing succession. All were operating within extremely complex family companies and were facing numerous conflicts between generations and between siblings that could not be readily resolved. Invariably these families discussed their problems in great detail, perhaps as stress relief as much as anything else.

Interestingly, almost all respondents had a 'horror story' to tell about the negative experiences neighbours or acquaintances from another farming area had faced over issues of succession. Perhaps there was a degree of denial taking place in these families; these problems were occurring, but 'not in my backyard'.

Let us now explore decisions related to succession in greater detail.

Do I want a child to come home? Rural tradition has it that at least one child in a family, preferably male, will be

encouraged to remain in farming - this is part of maintaining the continuity of farming. A component of thinking about the long-term future of the farm involves the decision whether to facilitate one or more children continuing to farm the family property. Bearing this in mind, respondents were asked if they hoped one or more children would take over the farm. Although a meaningful percentage (41.1%) indicated their desire for at least one child to take over the farm, 27.5% were unsure, and 22% were definitely against the idea. The number of those answering in the affirmative might be considered somewhat lower than expected but is in line with the research alluded to earlier (including Gray and Phillips 1996; Gray and Lawrence 2001) indicating a decline in the emphasis farming families place on continuity.

For those parents who were happy for their children to return, the majority wanted their offspring to at least spend time away from the farm gaining a trade or tertiary education:

If the boys want to and can, then fine. It would be natural progression, but I'd encourage them to get a trade or go to uni first (Female, 20s).

Yes, we've thought about it. The children will be free to be what they want. If they want to farm, they'll have to do a trade first. We're aiming towards the farm being sustainable for the future. They'll be given the choice...We'll make the final decision early, and let them know as soon as possible, as soon as we've finished having children. We're not having problems, but there are plenty of people who are. I know of one family, they've been on the farm all [the son's] life, and now must divide the property between the siblings (Female, 20s).

This was in line with the sentiments expressed elsewhere in their interviews, where many respondents stressed the importance of 'being educated', a trend that appeared to reflect a distinct change from the farming sector's perceived lack of commitment to post-secondary education (for example Prior 1990 in Small 1991, p. 9; Bamberg et al 1997).

Is it possible to identify the characteristics of the 'typical farmer' hoping a child/children would come home to the farm? There were no clear relationships between education, gender, or religiosity and hoping a child or children would 'come home', but it did appear that farmers in the 50-59 year age group were less likely to want their children to take over from them than any other age group. Anecdotal evidence intimated this was related to these farmers having been given no option but to become farmers themselves.

Respondents with small-medium sized properties (less than 1000 hectares) were more likely to discourage their children from taking over than any other size group, perhaps related to what may be considered a non-viable farm in the long term. These owners may not have the income to purchase the additional land required to make the farm economically sustainable, or necessarily have the inclination. Furthermore, given that land is very tightly held in all three communities, land is not necessarily readily available for purchase.

Why do you want the farm to continue on? Why was it that about 40 percent of respondents did want the farm to continue on in the family? The literature suggests that is likely to be primarily for reasons of heritage and tradition, and so it was in this study. By far the most frequent explanation for pursuing continuity was articulated as 'carrying on the history of the farm'. As this farmer expressed "After all, it was given to me to pass on..." (Male, 40s). The same value placed on history and tradition was reflected in these comments:

A continuity of tradition - it would be a tragedy to see it leave the family (Male, 60s).

I don't believe any particular generation works in isolation (Female, 50s).

You're not in it for the money. A good farmer nurtures their country. Their farms will get better. It's a heritage, a responsibility. Hand it on to our grandsons (no, our grandchildren) in a better shape than we got it, and that means putting back what our forefathers took out. Like planting trees.

My grandfather selected it. Because I love farming. [son] loves farming. It gets in your blood. It's that spiritual aspect. It's very hard to explain. I could sell up, but [son] would have to start all over again. My Father handed it to me, I handed it to [son], he'll hand it on (Male, 50s)

Some kept farming to give their children and their children's children the opportunity to farm if they so choose.

[Son] has taken over the control of the whole thing. He's actually an agronomist in Trangie. He's developing the land for growth. He'll probably never come back to the farm unless he had the money to expand, and buy another block of land...a couple of [our] children want to hold on until their children are old enough to see if they want to farm (Female, 60s).

...we would like to give him [son] opportunity if he wants to do it. Our aim is to make sure the farm is available to be handed on. There is no pressure on him to be a farmer.

He will be educated to do whatever he wants (Husband and wife, 30s).

If I didn't want it for the boys I would have left long ago with all I've had to put up with (Male, 50s).

Other respondents talked of their love of farming and the farming lifestyle, and wanting their children to be able to participate in what they considered to be an enjoyable occupation.

When you put as much work and love into the farm with the future in mind, you'd like to think it was carried on in the same vein (Male, 30s).

The things I've done I'd like to see them continue, especially growing trees, the soils, the paddocks improved. I hope he [son] gets the satisfaction of doing the same (Male, 50s).

I want the kids to be able to continue with the lifestyle and the freedom (Female, 40s).

This farmer, co-owner of one of the bigger properties in the study, observed that he only wanted his children to continue in farming:

For the same reasons I enjoy it. Only reason I'd want them to. I guess it'd be nice to have a common bond with my sons regarding what you do. But it's also child abuse. I wouldn't want it to go on for the sake of nostalgia. I'd hate me to loose it but it would be harder still to loose farming all together. I'd like to get more land, but we can't afford to (Male, 20s).

Another farmer, in partnership with his parents and brother, illustrated the strain placed on family relationships by expectations of continuity:

I'm [happy] and I'm not. I'd like someone to take over but I

don't want him to be in the situation I'm in. It's great - it keeps it going. There's a potential problem with my brother's son who might come home. I'd find it difficult to work with him. He's a moody bugger [like his father]. A very bad tempered sod (Male, 40s).

Why wouldn't you like the children to keep farming? While 40% of respondents did hope at least one child would remain on the family farm, this meant that 60% were ambivalent or totally against the idea, with the former prevailing.

For those who have 'mixed feelings' about their children coming home, there were several explanations proffered, primarily related to economic and social issues:

Yes, we'd be very happy but there's not necessarily enough work for both of us to do full time. It would be OK if he had a part-time job as well (Male, 50s).

For the majority of respondents with this philosophy, the main reason was 'there's no money in it...'

We would be giving them a millstone. Financially it would be a disaster (Male, 50s).

Because there are easier ways of making a living (Male, 20s).

Other parents were concerned with hard work:

They [the children] see the farm isn't viable and see something beyond the farm. They can see farmers work so hard and there's a lot of pressure. They see dad work 7 days a week. Why would they want to do that? (Female, 40s).

Two families were actively discouraging their children from returning. They did not want to force their children to be farmers, as they had been:

I'm not encouraging my sons to come back, but if they want to they can, because it's a good life. They're better off going into the police force or the army or something like that instead. I had no choice. (Male, 40s).

Likewise this respondent, mindful of how he had been treated when he returned to the family farm, talked of how:

We wouldn't have wanted him [the son] to come home. I was treated as a boy when I came home. It's a huge problem. I've met lots of people who've faced the same problem. Like the Grandfather who was still on the farm, the father was home, then the two boys came home. What a disaster! Generation gap was huge. If there's a financial impediment (for example, the parents have full control of the business) it's a disaster. There's a lot of baggage. All this guilt of passing on the farm. Mum's [his wife] always brainwashed the children to never want to come back (Male, 50s).

Choosing a successor

The choice of successor/s is an important step in the succession process yet only one-third (32.2%) of respondents had chosen a successor or successors. Tertiary educated respondents and those who completed secondary education were less likely to have chosen a successor, but these people were also more likely to be younger with young children and not in the position to make a choice.

There appeared to be no relationship between gender and whether a successor has been chosen nor between farm size and having chosen a successor, with the families on the smallest and largest farms more likely to have made a choice than those residing on properties between 1500-3000

hectares in size. Perhaps this related to the latter's possibly questionable status in terms of viability, with the smaller properties almost certainly in an untenable position and the largest assured of a future. It is an area where further research is needed.

Other concerns over succession

Overall, 21.9% of respondents indicated they had additional concerns over the succession process. These concerns were more likely to be found in respondents with small-medium farms (possibly not viable in the long term) and in larger enterprises operated as complex family business entities encompassing multiple generations and siblings (and their families). Those with a part secondary education or other tertiary qualifications appeared more likely to have concerns than other education groups. There appeared to be a relationship between religiosity and concern over succession, in that those who were not religious are more likely to be concerned than their religious counterparts. However, numbers were too small to draw any conclusions from a statistical analysis; it is a situation that certainly merits further inquiry using a larger sample.

Distribution of assets between children

The most common 'other' concern revolved around how to best distribute assets fairly while keeping the farm a viable entity. This was illustrated in numerous ways, but no more so than in this family of five young boys. As their mother observed:

How we can distribute it fairly?
We're not encouraging or discouraging them to come back, and they'd have to do a trade first. But the one farm can't be handed to one boy. It is a big problem. We'll take each day as it comes. I'm not looking forward to it. We won't let them start on the farm. It's the uncertainty that drives you to despair (Female, 30s).

An older farmer with two daughters with well established off-farm careers and one son on the farm observed a similar conflict of interest:

If you're going to be fair, you can't take out the daughters. If I hadn't been an only child, the opportunities wouldn't have happened. I believe it's an option at this stage. I'll keep the options open, but the girls are pretty set. Communication is happening and the children expect to know (Male, 60s).

The willingness of parents to consider their daughters as inheritors of the farms was spoken of by other families; the statement below reflected their concern:

I'd like to hand over to [son] but sons of lawyers aren't expected to be lawyers. But if my daughters wanted to, I wouldn't stop her. I don't want to stereotype them. But I'd like to think it would stay in the family (Male, 30s).

One could surmise that the idea of 'girls taking over' was something of an afterthought in the following case. Note how the girls' partners were seen as potentially making 'great farmers', with nothing said about the abilities of the daughters themselves. However, the respondent did acknowledge the 'traditional thoughts' that were shaping his perceptions of the situation:

There's no point if there's no future in it. I see no point in struggling along if [son] wasn't interested. If [son] decided it just wasn't worthwhile...if one of the girls also showed interest [their partners would make great farmers]. It's wonderful to have [son] involved. It's easy to get bogged down in traditional thoughts. If you're going to be fair, you can't take out the daughters. (Male, 60s).

The willingness of some parents to consider their daughters as successors has been noted above but in the majority of cases daughters were not 'expected' to want to come back. And why would they? When it came to the crunch, it still appeared sons were more likely to inherit the farm than their sisters: "It wouldn't be natural" (Male, 20's) to do it any other way. After all,

They wouldn't have had the choice - there's only enough room for one anyway. It would be OK if we had plenty of acreage, but it's not real good work for pregnant women (Male, 20s)

There were similarities in this situation:

I've got three sisters, all younger. One would have come back, maybe two, would have come back if you'd let them. But Dad was old fashioned. His philosophy was sons get the farm, girls get the wedding. The girls weren't encouraged to want the farm, which was the way it was. They've since married and moved away (Male, 30s).

and in this:

But we still have a huge debt. The girls won't have a share of the farm, but will have off-farm assets... (Male, 40s).

While this may seem inequitable, for the farmer below with three daughters and one son, handing on the farm to the son meant only the son took on the burden of debt. In his eyes at least, this made the arrangement more equal:

My Father handed it to me, I handed it to [son] he'll hand it on....[My daughter] would have done it too, but she probably can't because she'd been so sick...I guess it's not a big problem. [Son] has the debt - I worked for many years for

nothing. I inherited [dad's] debt, we're always in debt. Just before [son] came home things were ok but.... There'll be a lot more issues when I'm ready to retire. Fairness has to come in, but if you took it [a bit away] you couldn't make a go of it. There's not enough. The girls don't want the debt, so I don't think it'll be a big issue (Male, 50s).

Of course, this response may be this father's way of justifying the inequities to himself. One wonders what the daughters thought of his philosophy.

Inadequate farm size Other concerns included the small size of the family farm and its apparent inability to support two or more families, already identified a number of quotes and highlighted in this case:

It's what we'd like our son to do, and what is a viable option. We'd like to keep it in the family, but it's probably not a viable option, given the property's size...(Male, 50s).

Poor family relationships Poor inter-generational and intra-generational relationships posed concerns in three partnerships. In the situation described below, this farmer was waiting for his siblings to decide his future. His extended family was paying the price for trying to maintain continuity and reduce the burdens of past death duties by instituting a complex arrangement between family members with vastly different goals and values:

It's a company. I manage. My uncle and father were here, but they're retired. My brothers and sister have shares but none will sell to me. We're having fights over it. We need to do something. I've had one heart attack already. We don't get income from off the farm. They're only holding off till their

fathers die, then it'll hit the fan. I'm stuck here. I want to set it up for my own children to buy...There will be 11 in the next generation (there's only 5 now), we have to cut it off now. They have to give my dad an answer at Christmas about whether they'll give their shares to me, sell it or what. The accountant suggested we should go bankrupt so they'd get nothing.

The farm was sold out of the family two years after this interview was carried out.

What if there is no successor? The literature suggests that where there is no successor, a farm will be run down until it is eventually sold, in the meantime having negative impacts on productivity and profitability (for example, Potter and Lobley 1992a, b; 1996) in a process known as the 'succession effect'.

While the majority of respondents in the study who did not or may not have a successor agreed that in the long term "there'd be no option but to sell" (Male, 30s, with four young daughters), there was no evidence to suggest that any of these properties were being 'run down'. In no way could farmers in this situation be construed as 'pulling back' and not investing in the long-term future of the farm. They were engaged in farming practices that were directed at keeping the farm in good condition for the next generation (however they perceived that 'good' to be), even if that generation was not their own flesh and blood. All were actively involved in agronomic and other research in conjunction with government extension agencies and/or a local farm supplier. Two regularly hosted field days on their properties. One was actively pursuing options to reduce herbicide usage, and all utilised minimum or zero tillage practices.

Throughout their conversations, the farmers' comments highlighted their preference to keep the farm in the family for as long as possible, even if this meant putting a manager onto the farm or leasing the farm rather than selling:

Yes, we take one day at a time. It might be sold. [Nephew] I don't think wants to come over. But I wouldn't want it to be sold. It's part of the family. That's sentimental (Female, 50s).

We'll never retire to the coast. Whether we'll actually lease it out or something. You never know what the children are going to do...by the time we're done educating the kids bit we could afford to put other people on and live off the proceeds. [Husband] isn't one to insist the children come on (Female, 40s).

Heritage and tradition continued to be highly important values manifest here:

Maybe my sister's kids will be interested but they're young yet. I only share farm (lease) it at the moment. Hopefully he (or she) might visit it and see the land as their heritage. My parents would like them to have the opportunity to try it (Male, 50s).

Retirement Only seven respondents specifically mentioned retirement during their interviews, all in reference to the plans they had in place for that time in their lives. One respondent had already retired for reasons of ill health. Another farmer, son of 'retired' parents now living in Sydney talked of their family situation:

Dad said 'Are you coming home? I said yes, so Dad got a job. It's not big enough for 2 families. Mum's a real people person now working in

Sydney. Since I left school I've been here, except in 1989 when I was at Bible College. I'm a 5th generation farmer (Male, 30s).

Of the remainder, one female respondent liked

to think farming has a career span. That we could retire off the farm - retire and put a manager on (Female, 30s).

Her husband raised his eyebrows at this response, but said nothing.

An older respondent noted the difficulties of funding his retirement when the family's cash and financial reserves were expended during the last big drought:

There's a lot my age ineligible to get the pension and I can't pull my weight on the farm. Officially the law would say sell some of your assets and live on that. But that wouldn't be fair on him [son]. It'd pull the rug out from under him, and that wouldn't be fair on him would it? But I do the books, and that's nearly a full time job (Male, 80s).

From the perspective of other respondents, why would a farmer want to retire anyway? The ties to the land and to farming would be too strong:

It would be the end of me if I had to sell. I like going out and talking to my cows (Male, 60s).

If you make them [parents] retire, they'll die (Male, 40s).

Conclusions

Although family and children are of the utmost importance to the vast majority of respondents, the tradition of handing on the family farm to the next generation can no longer be considered the norm in these communities. As this respondent summed up the situation:

We've still got quite a few of [husband]'s vintage who are still in farming families, but are the sons coming home? They aren't. Once there was just one transition from school to home. The age of farmers is getting older around here. Some come back after a while, but certainly not all of them. Most don't come straight home. Trends aren't taken for granted anymore (Female, 50s).

Indeed, less than half of the respondents indicated they definitely wanted a child or children to return to the family farm. Although perpetuating family history and tradition were significant goals in these families (like those in studies by Gray 1991; Phillips 1998; Villi 1999) young people were being given the choice to farm. This was reflected in the increased levels of education and the provision of career options that were identified as being the paramount goals of the majority of parents had for their children. This trend appears to have emerged from a growing concern over the future of agriculture and an unwillingness to saddle children with excessive debt, low income and heavy workload. In some cases it also highlighted parents' unwillingness to force children into farming as they had been.

Simply because the significance of continuity is being challenged from various sides does not mean a decreased interest in providing for the needs of family. On the contrary, the ability of the farm to provide sufficient income to educate farm children for a career of their choosing appeared to be a primary concern to the vast majority of respondents with young families.

Perhaps it is more accurate to suggest young *men* are being given the option to farm. In the three communities, farming was definitely being viewed as an inherently 'masculine' occupation a situation where culture continues to be

highly significant in terms of the relationship between gender and being given the option to farm. No farming family appeared to be actively encouraging girls to 'want' to farm, and in many cases they were being given no choice but to leave. Overall, parents appeared to consider farming an unviable career path for women.

There were three exceptions to this; three families contemplating naming one or more daughters as successors. In these families boys were disinterested or nonexistent.

Overall, the inequality in inheritance between genders was an ongoing tension that had been recognised as such by some parents. However, the majority argued that if they were left with off-farm assets and no debt, daughters were well provided for; equity in inheritance simply was not an issue.

There are few characteristics distinguishing those respondents who favour within-family succession or otherwise. Those residing on smaller properties appeared slightly less likely to favour continuity than those on larger properties but the relationship was not clear-cut. There may have been a slight relationship between religiosity and wanting children to come home; certainly non-religious people showed more concerns over the succession process than their religious peers. On this basis one can hypothesise that the relationship between religion and farming has its foundation in the importance given to the 'family' as an entity. That is, the link between the two lies more in the confidence religious people (or more specifically, 'Christian' people) have in their family relationships, and the importance they place on their families and on traditional gender roles, than in a stronger farming tradition *per se*. Testing this line of reasoning requires additional research.

What of the implications of no successor? The literature suggests that

where there is no successor, farmers will tend to reduce the intensity of their farming enterprises as they get older, in particular spending less time conserving their natural resources. There was no evidence to suggest this 'succession' affect was occurring on the study farms, with all but one of the respondents who identified themselves as possibly or definitely without successors pursuing a variety of 'innovative' farm practice directed at improving sustainability.

To what extent can the results of this study be compared to other farming communities? While the smaller size of the sample inherent in most qualitative research limits the extent to which the results can be carried over into other farming communities, this must be balanced out by the incredible richness and depth of the data collected, and the insights into why farmers are doing what they do.

In saying this, there are other limitations that must be acknowledged, including the potential impact the experiences and background of the interviewer will have on the direction of the interviewee, the dependence of the quality of data gathered on the effectiveness of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee and an emphasis on the farmers themselves, to the detriment of understanding the environment within which they are operating. The latter was overcome by incorporating an extensive discussion of external factors impacting upon farmer decision-making in the interviews.

Difficulties were also encountered in assessing the validity and reliability of data. These complications were illustrated in part by the difficulty of persuading respondents to be interviewed separately. Many were reluctant to talk independently of their partner, possibly having an impact on the honesty and openness of responses, particularly in answers to questions relating to family relationships. This situation could also be viewed positively,

in that those interviews completed jointly presented the advantage of seeing how spouses and children revealed tensions in an interview situation. Perhaps some held back, but others did not hesitate to argue, occasionally quite violently, in the writer's presence. Similar problems often occurred when discussing issues of succession.

The main disadvantage of this reluctance to talk lies in terms of potential bias. Undoubtedly it is an inherent risk but one difficult to overcome given the constraints of the methodological process and the wishes of the respondents. It is a risk that could possibly be reduced in future research by undertaking two or more interviews with the respondents thereby making questioning less threatening. Indeed a more in-depth exploration of personal viewpoints over time would be a valuable further research project. Likewise, an exploration of the same issues using a larger sample would be particularly useful.

Nonetheless, there are many invaluable observations here. In the sample population at least, there is some evidence pointing to significant difficulties succession can potentially bring to the farming process and to the longer-term sustainability of the farm. However, as identified in other literature, succession and continuity are viewed as non-issues for the majority of respondents. Resolution appears taken for granted. Having said that, 'what to do with the farm' remains a crucial process and emotion - the attachment to place, 'my farm and my land' that most respondents have as a key factor driving many present actions.

Whether there is conflict or certainty in the succession process, there is considerable support here for the contention that farming culture, shaped not only by an emphasis on family and patriarchy but also by distinctive religious beliefs and values, is

strengthening the emphasis placed on 'family' to the extent that 'family' is being viewed as more important than the farm. Are we seeing here a re-negotiation of farming tradition - from the vision of the family working to build up a farm to a place where the farm is there to support the family?

The need for understanding more about the consequences of this trend, particularly in terms of its medium and long-term implications for the sustainability of Australian agriculture, provides much fertile ground for further research.

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