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## A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITY OF FAMILY FARM TRANSFERS.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the development of a systemic learning and researching approach to the farm transfer process. The key ideas that have informed this are systems thinking, experiential learning, action researching, and the technique of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA).

These ideas were applied to a research project conducted with people from the farming community of Tottenham-Nyngan and the service towns of Dubbo, Forbes and Parkes in the Central West of New South Wales (N.S.W.)

The authors' field work and educational practice is based upon the desire to aid people in better understanding their situations, and improving their ability to take action.

### INTRODUCING OUR APPROACH

The transfer of the family farm from one generation to the next is a complex and problematic affair. By 'transfer of the family farm' we mean, the transference of labour, profit, decision making and ownership. This transfer process is seen as complex, as it involves many 'actors', each holding differing perspectives - grandparents, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, siblings, solicitors, accountants, bank managers, and so on. Moreover, the transfer of the farm is considered problematic, with the process being enmeshed in many other social and cultural systems, bringing a variety of expectations and emotional responses. For example:

#### On **planning** for transfer:

We've just never given it much thought. We've gone about our busy lifestyle. You hear about retirement and you know its coming and, oh well, it's still a long way off.  
(Farm Parents)

..... 70pc of families are "poorly to hopelessly" prepared for handing on the farm, with often devastating results. The root cause of the problems is that nobody wants to think about dying. (Farm management consultant).



### On **who** inherits:

I really do like my brother --- the problem is --- he was born six years my senior. This left me to bear the cross of being the second son. Steven got to inherit the family farm, and I got a jolly good education. (Farm son).

What about our daughter - what does she get? (Wife).  
She can get the trike (Husband). (Farm parents).

...and my father took that (farm) over from my grandfather. And then I took it over. And now my son. So it's sort of been a continuation really. That's the way I see it. (Farmer).

Given this variety of perspectives, we recognise that we are not merely looking at **one** difficult problem in relation to farm family transfers. Rather, we recognise that there are as many problems as there are participants in this process. Each participant perceives the question of the family farm transfer process differently, according to their particular role and history of life experiences.

Our approach then, may be seen to be located within the emerging tradition of trans-disciplinary 'systemic' research. The philosophical tradition informing this approach is 'constructivism'. In the constructivist tradition, it is asserted that each person's view of what is 'real' is affected by the history of their experiences in life (White 1989). As researchers, we recognise that in observing the family farm transfer process, we are also helping to 'construct' this reality. We acknowledge that our ways of researching will determine what for us, constitutes the transfer process - the interactions and boundaries of the system.

As researchers playing an observer's role, we need to be aware of our world-views because they both influence what we observe and why and how we act. It seems to us that the most fundamental assumptions we hold, affect the way we work with farm transfers. For example, we, the authors of this paper consider that our coming from a Christian perspective explicitly informs our researching.

Whilst a constructivist approach is apparent in a range of fields of inquiry, for example, second order cybernetics (Sluzki, 1985), sociology (Berger and Luckman, 1966) or biology (Maturana and Varela, 1987), it has only quite recently been developed in trans-disciplinary or systemic farming research.

We see the challenge of our research as the furnishing of a strategic framework which allows exploration of the complexity of



the transfer process and which also enables the participants to gain further insight and understanding of themselves.

The focus of this paper is on our development of a process of researching, which both enables the range of perspectives to be acknowledged, and facilitates the satisfactory participation of all involved. We will illustrate our approach, by referring to the Tottenham - Nyngan Project (hereafter referred to as The Project). (The Transfer of the Family Farm: A Community Response, Blunden, Gamble and Sims, 1989).

## **THE TOTTENHAM-NYNGAN FARM TRANSFER PROJECT**

The decision to conduct research into farm transfers was made following discussion in 1988 between Malcolm Voyce (Solicitor), Dennis Gamble (Farm Business Management) and Stephen Blunden (Farm Management), all of whom had become aware of difficulties with transfer, through previous experiences with numerous farm families. It was noted through a national literature search (Voyce) that, in contrast to Australia, considerable research had been carried out in North America and Europe.

Tottenham - Nyngan, is a mixed farming (sheep, cattle and cereals) district in the Central West of NSW. Farm families were contacted through the financial counsellor (well regarded in the community), who sent an introductory letter on our behalf. Via telephone, we invited these people to participate in a series of semi-structured interviews, in order to identify their concerns related to the transfer process. Solicitors, accountants and bank managers who worked with the community were also approached concurrently.

Semi-structured interviews (Gamble, 1990) were conducted using a multi-disciplinary team of interviewers over four days, in May 1989, with twenty-seven farm families from the Tottenham-Nyngan district, and sixteen professionals (accountants, solicitors and bank managers) from the surrounding service towns of Forbes, Parkes and Dubbo. On completion of the preliminary analysis, a report was written for the participants, mirroring back what we had heard during the interviews. (Blunden et al, 1989).

We followed the posting of this report with a phone questionnaire designed to ascertain the participants response to the report. The response was overwhelmingly positive with many commenting particularly on the accuracy and readability of the report. The general desire of the participants was that a 'workshop' be held.



In designing this workshop we were mindful of our desire to create a balance between a participative approach and input from the keynote speakers (an accountant and solicitor from within the region). In order to create further community ownership, we invited a farming family within the district to co-ordinate the day. As a result, broad communication often took place by commercial band radio, alerting the wider community to the workshop. Many others in the district subsequently requested to be present. To assist those outside this community we invited the regional rural reporter from the ABC to observe the day. The workshop, conducted in February 1990, was deemed very successful by the participants. We documented the outcomes of the day, and communicated this in the form of a letter to all participants (Gamble & Blunden, 1990). The community expressed their desire for us to continue our involvement. One person even commented, "These University people aren't that bad."

Subsequent media coverage of the interview and the workshop resulted in many phone calls and letters requesting information and assistance. In particular, an article in the major rural newspaper in NSW - 'The Land', elicited a total of 130 letters from farm families and a wide range of professionals (family law court, parliamentary committee, media, academics, consultants, farm advisors, banks, solicitors and accountants). We believe this enthusiastic response validates both the need to research farm transfer, as well as our approaches to researching.

### **IDEAS INFORMING OUR RESEARCHING OF THE TOTTENHAM-NYNGAN FARM TRANSFER PROJECT**

In reflecting on our development of a framework and process for working with the complexity of family farm transfers, we see that:

What we do is a reflection of what we think.

What we think is shaped by what we do.

That is, the ideas (theories, concepts and models) forming the basis of our ways of researching (our doing as reflection of our thinking), were themselves modified through our 'doing' - our working with the people of Tottenham - Nyngan, the professionals in the region, and other members of our research team.

Our project was shaped and informed by the application and practice of systems thinking to agriculture and education in the



Faculty of Agriculture and Rural Development, University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury (for detail, see Bawden (1988) or Wilson (1988).)

Discussion of this will be organized, in terms of our development of systemic ways of viewing situations; and flexible learning and researching processes.

#### A. Systemic Ways of Viewing situations.

Our observation of past approaches to working with farm transfers (the professions, extension and research ) was that they worked with narrow or single perspectives on small components of the whole situation. Being systemic in the way we worked with farm family transfer, involved:

Viewing the whole farm as a **human activity system** (Bawden & Valentine 1984) where the needs, hopes, purpose, and lifestyle of the members of the farm family provides the context for looking at and analysing the farm and the farm's transfer. This view prevents a fragmented approach where wills, business structures, retirement, transfers of labour, management and assets may be treated in isolation to each other and in isolation from the context of the farm and the needs of the farm family.

Viewing the farm as a human activity system also means attention is given to both the individual components of the proposed system, and the interactions and relationships between these components.

In practical terms this means moving between the messy complex issues of understanding the needs of family members, through to working out broad strategies, such as wills and business structures to help achieve their hopes and desires.

Viewing situations systemically, involves recognising that there are **multiple perspectives** on any situation. We acknowledge that people

do not always notice the same thing, even when they are looking at the same object....[and that]

....in order to understand other people, we must be prepared to adopt their perspective, or to "wear their shoes", at least temporarily (Poythress 1987 p.9)



The research team viewed the farm family transfer situation from different perspectives. We built up a comprehensive picture of farm transfers from the different disciplinary perspectives of team members, including farm business management, extension, farm technology, legal accounting and taxation. The team also brought other perspectives relating to the diverse range of life experiences, personalities, beliefs and values represented. As the project progressed, it became necessary that we each made explicit our individual needs, values, world-views and approaches in order to deal with conflicts over our differing perceptions of the data.

The notion of looking for **patterns and comparisons** is also an important aspect of working systemically with complex situations (Conway, 1990). The identification of patterns of farm transfer between generations, within families, and key events in the life of each family member provided important clues as to what farm transfer may mean for them.

## **B. Flexible Learning and Researching Processes.**

Working systemically with the content of complex situations requires the parallel development of flexible learning concepts and processes.

As we had no idea where our inquiry could lead us, we needed a flexible and iterative learning process that would enable use to learn our way through the complexity of the situation. That is, we did not see as appropriate a learning or researching process based on a set 'recipe' or plan. Rather we saw it as necessary that our learning process be able to be adapted and changed as new knowledge and insights came to light.

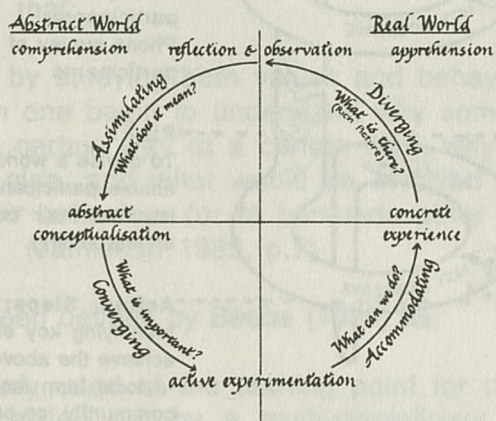
The quality of the outcomes of our project were directly dependent on the learning processes that we designed for each stage of the project. Considerable thought and planning went into the design of how we: *interacted* with farm families, bank managers, accountants, solicitors and with our own research team; *collected* and *analysed* the data; *identified* issues and planned action steps; *took action* in giving feedback to the participants; *involved* participants in future steps such as the design of workshops on farm transfer; *interacted* with the media; how we *networked* professionals involved with farm transfer; and *designed* future research initiatives in farm transfer. The three models that directly informed our activities, are outlined below.



## 1. The Kolb Learning Model (Kolb, 1984)

In this iterative model of experiential learning, (Figure 1) the 'learner' is seen to alternate between the world of lived experience (the 'real' world) and the world of concepts (the 'abstract' world) as they seek to make sense of their environment, and hence, behave more effectively in it. (Bawden and Macadam; 1988)

Figure 1 An Adaption of the Kolb Learning Cycle



As can be seen, in Figure 1, the Kolb model highlights four basic questions, which we considered in relation to our research

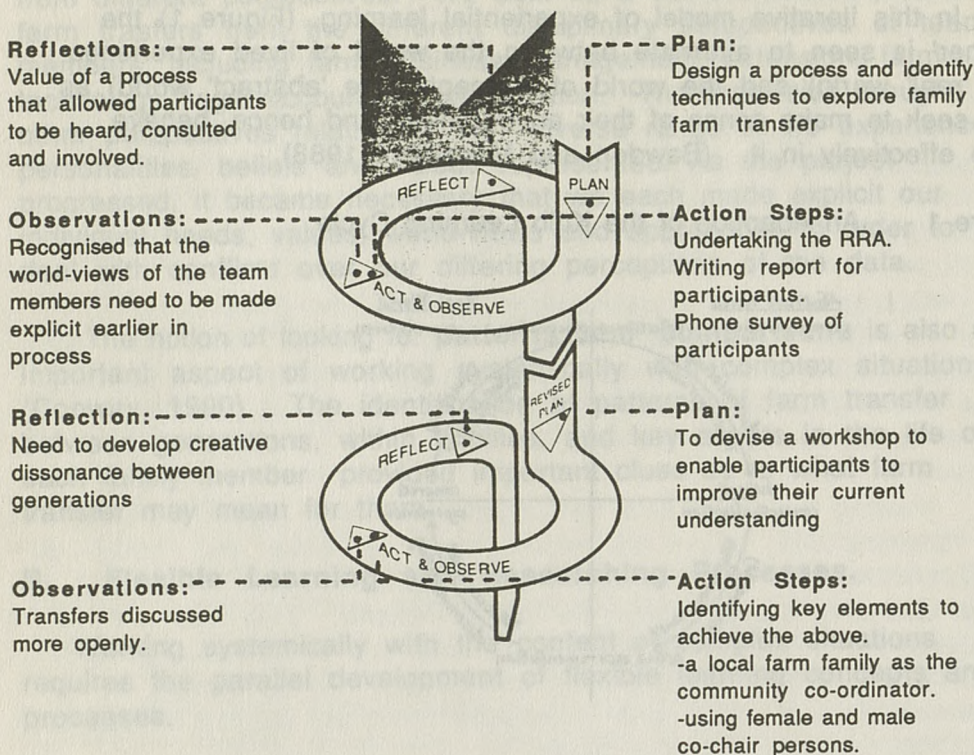
This model provided a process for building a comprehensive picture of farm transfers (diverging and assimilating) identifying issues and themes that emerge, (converging) and taking appropriate action (accommodating). It also prevented us from making premature judgements on issues (accommodating). In other words the learning cycle provided us with a broad process for learning and acting in relation to researching farm transfers.

## 2. The Action - Research Model (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988)

We consider that action-research provided a practical way of working within the framework set by the Kolb model. Action-research, as depicted in Figure 2, is also iterative in nature, as planning and actions may be continually modified in response to our reflection on the process.



Figure 2 An Illustration of Action Research Spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)



The action-research approach seeks to involve and facilitate the learning and development of all the participants. **Research** is understood as being "with" people, not "on" people. In our case, we sought to involve farm families and their professionals together with the research team, in the empowering process of learning about farm transfers.

Other researchers take our time but give nothing back. You have produced a report that is written for us.

Why wasn't this done 20 years ago in our district.

You have raised a closet subject of farm transfer up the agenda as an acceptable subject to talk about between family members and between farm families.

This process furthermore, seeks to develop in participant the concept that 'the change process must begin with me'. (McTaggart, 1989)

We have begun to take action in the transfer of our family farm as a result of being involved in this project.



3. The Rapid Rural Appraisal Process (Beebe, (1985), Conway Mc Cracken and Pretty (1987) Mc Cracken and Mearns (1989) and Jamieson (1985))

This was the specific approach we used to work within the context of the Kolb Learning Cycle and Action-Research.

Rapid Rural Appraisal (R.R.A) has been used extensively in developing countries to identify research priorities and involve the local community in the learning and change process. It was born out of a belief that:

Only by studying both values and behaviour in a specific context can one begin to understand why some people do certain things in a certain way at a certain time, why they choose not to do something else, and what would be involved in motivating them to change their behaviour (or to persuade other people to stop trying to change it). (Jamieson 1985, p.7)

RRA has been defined by Beebe (1985) as:

A study used at the starting point for understanding a local situation; carried out by a multi-disciplinary team; lasting at least 4 days and not more than 3 weeks; and based on information collected in advance, direct observation, and interviews where it is assumed that all relevant questions cannot be identified in advance. (Beebe 1985, p.6)

The close relationship has been pointed out by McCracken and Mearns:

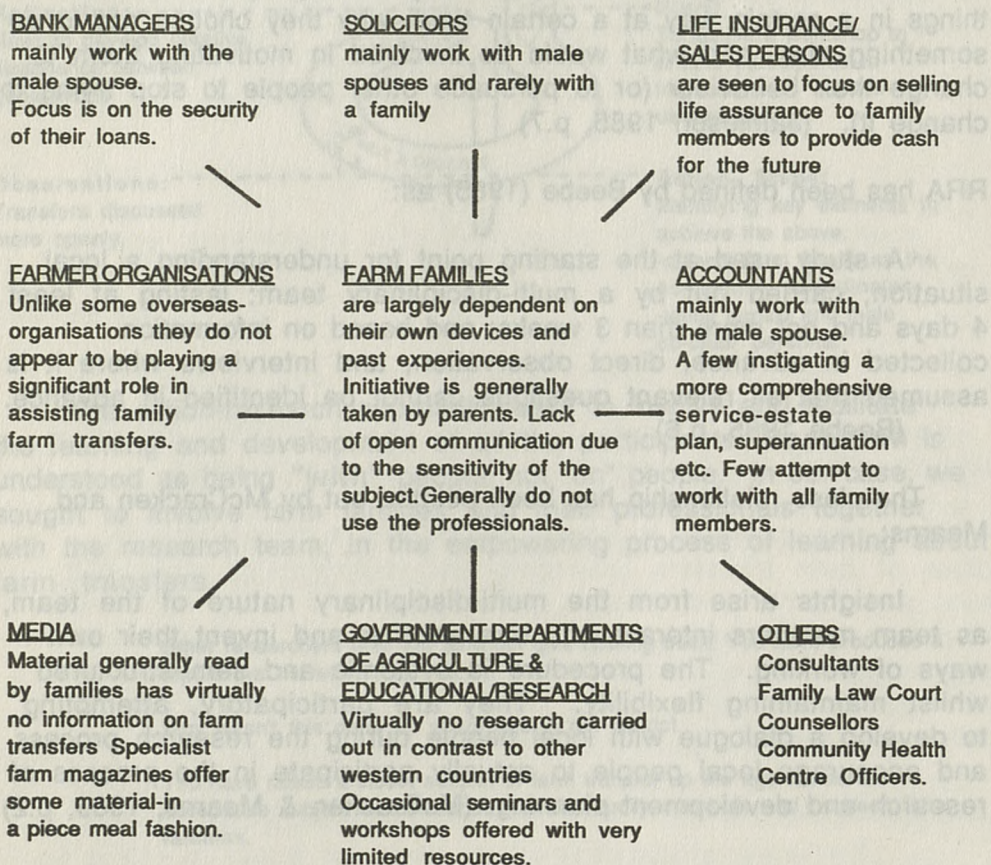
Insights arise from the multi-disciplinary nature of the team, as team members interact with one another and invent their own ways of working. The procedure is systemic and semi-structured whilst maintaining flexibility. They are participatory, attempting to develop a dialogue with local people during the research process and encourage local people to actually participate in the process of research and development planning. (McCracken & Mearns, 1989, p.2)



## AN ONGOING SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO FARM TRANSFER RESEARCH

Following our involvement in the Tottenham-Nyngan project, we constructed a picture, (Figure 3) of our understanding of the nature of the interactions between farm families and the various professional groups that impinge on the transfer process. Discussion and correspondence with farmers and professionals throughout Australia revealed that this picture is indicative of the situation nationally.

Figure 3 Interactions between Farm Families and Related Professional Groups' in the Farm Transfer Process N.S.W.



Our overall impression is that: the professionals work within narrow disciplinary perspectives and generally only with the male spouse of the older generation; most farm families are largely dependent on their own resources; communication within families

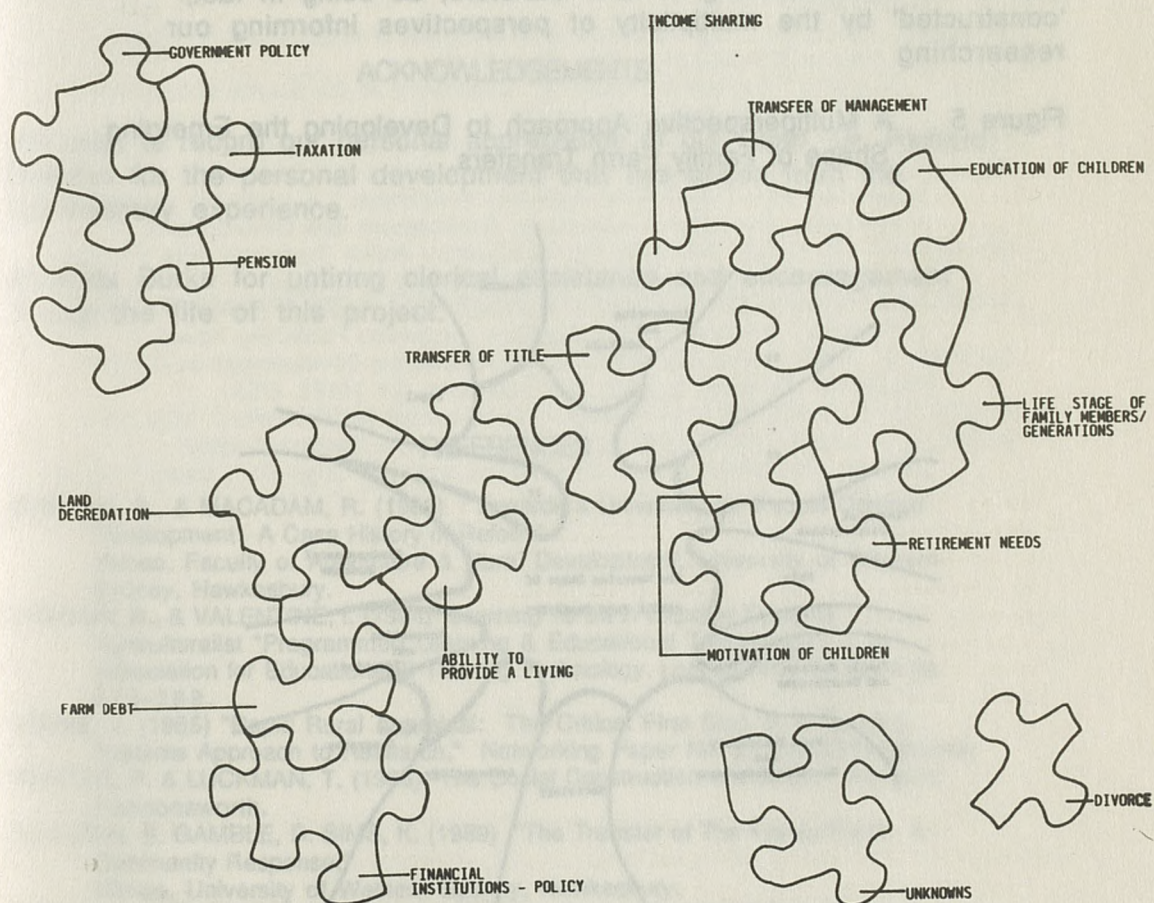


is hindered by transfer's association with death, the popular media rarely covers this issue, and then taking a "piece meal" approach.

From a systemic perspective however, we realized that there are a number of closely interconnecting themes associated with farm transfers. These include: place, role and perspective of family members; farm debt; land degradation; life stage of each family member; farm viability and its ability to provide a living/s; business structures and associated tax and legal aspects; and government policies as they impact on transfer aspects.

As we attempted to grapple with these themes and their interactions, we developed the idea of depicting our researching approach to farm transfer as a jig-saw puzzle (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Part of the Puzzle of Family Farm Transfer



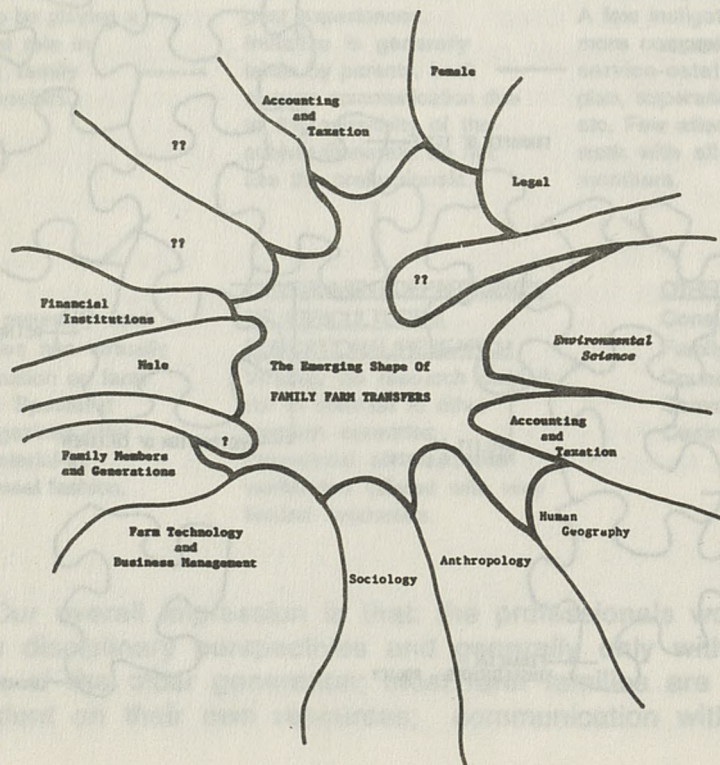


The metaphor of a puzzle indicates for us that: we did not know what the boundaries of 'farm transfer' would be; we did not have access to the 'full picture' before we began our research; we did not know the components (or themes) and how they impinged on each other ; the shape of the pieces (themes) would be different for different families; as our project progressed, some themes fitted together, but not as yet with the developing picture.

As can be seen, this is a much richer picture than that conveyed in Figure 3. Our understanding of the interactive nature of these themes, as actually shaping and informing the farm transfer process, came out of our constructivist aligned, systemically based researching approach.

As we worked with this puzzle model, it appeared to us that the picture, formed by the 'puzzle', would in itself be different when viewed from each different perspective. To illustrate this, figure 5 depicts our understanding of farm transfers, as being in fact, 'constructed' by the multiplicity of perspectives informing our researching

Figure 5 A Multiperspective Approach to Developing the Emerging Shape of Family Farm Transfers.





The perspectives we have used to date, to inform our understanding of farm transfers are labelled in bold print. The recent addition to the team of a female environmental scientist is represented in italics. We are aware of other perspectives that we would also like to add, including that of sociology, anthropology and human geography. As the project progresses, we appreciate that there will be other perspectives (as yet unknown), that will help us to further shape our researching and understanding of farm transfers.

We see this paper, in presenting the focus and processes of our researching, as having the potential to attract a further diversity of perspectives, through interaction (which we would very much welcome) with you, the reader. Our desire is to create a learning community between those people experiencing, researching or working with farm family transfers internationally.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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