

# No one to fill my shoes: narrative practices of three ageing Australian male farmers

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ageing Australian farmers face many uncertainties associated with wider social, economic and climate change. Significantly for many farmers, ageing means the end not only of a life-long occupation but the end of the farm that has often been in the family for many generations. In turn, the prospect of this discontinuity breaches long-held cultural images of Australian farming and farmers. For individual male farmers approaching retirement age, the lack of succession and discontinuation of the family's ownership of, and attachment to the land, poses threats for social and personal identity. This paper examines the narratives of three male, baby-boom Australian farmers to tease out the impact of ageing and the possible loss of the family farm on the ways that they construct their situations and their self-identity. It illustrates the narrative practices that these men employ as they work to validate their self-identities within particular narrative environments, and through a range of outmoded and contemporary material conditions that mediate their selves and lives. The approach exemplified in this paper focuses on the processes and phases of analysis to show how the farmers craft their narrative as well as the individuality, complexity and coherence of their accounts.

**KEY WORDS**—narrative practice, farming, identity, successful ageing.

## **Introduction**

During the last decade, research has highlighted the many and significant external challenges that have beset Australian agriculture as a result of socio-economic, demographic and climate change (Alston 2011; Lawrence 2005; Vanclay 2004). These changes are highly significant socio-logically because they challenge the ethos of a long-standing, culturally important Australian icon and occupation – the farmer and family farming. However, despite a body of literature focusing on the strong cultural, inter-generational and gendered aspects of Australian farming (Alston 2004; Bell 2005; Wythes and Lyons 2006), far less is known about the impact of these

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serious cultural changes on farmers themselves, particularly older male farmers grappling with maintaining their traditional male farmer identity. This study addresses this gap in knowledge by showing how the narrative environment or cultural context of farming not only shapes male farmers lives, but also constrains and limits their capacity to deal with contemporary change, more specifically ageing.

Within this context, there is pressure on ageing farmers, as others, to maintain their physical and mental health in order to age well. Certainly the cultural foundations provided by the past have provided ageing farmers with a particular identity and reliance on the discourse of resilience and stoicism. This has guided their thinking in the past and continues in the present. The strong narrative environment is characterised by hierarchical and patriarchal familial bonds, with divisions between work and family often blurred. The stories farmers tell are occasioned and conditioned by their local culture and traditions of farming with the prevailing cultural narrative of being seen as a good, strong, hardworking and tough farmer (Coldwell 2010; Gullifer and Thompson 2006; O'Callaghan 2014). Ideologies of the bush and the early pioneer spirit encompass these attributes, as well as meanings associated with hegemonic masculinity, living on the land and family farming.

The narratives analysed in this paper are a small sample from a larger doctoral study (O'Callaghan 2014) that illustrates how male farmers use the cultural resources supplied by traditional stories of the past and their contemporary narrative environment to navigate their experiences as men who are currently farming and growing older. These stories are evolving within the context of significant change, future scenarios for the ageing self and uncertainty. This paper addresses how three farmers, who have no next generation in the wings, craft their preferred narratives within a social policy environment that promotes healthy ageing, ageing in place and familialism (Hughes and Heycox 2010). In this complex, changing environment of farming and ageing roles, we argue that there is no narrative map providing them with the tools of how to age and they must navigate a new narrative terrain (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Phoenix and Sparkes 2006; Pollner and Stein 1996).

### **Narrative environment of an Australian male farmer**

Over recent decades, there have been significant changes to the profile and demography of Australian farmers. Australia, as in other western countries, has a growing proportion of ageing farmers, with the average age having increased from 47 years in 1986 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006) to

58 in 2006 (Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel 2008). Further, this is predicted to keep rising. As farmers age, young people are moving out and away from the farm in search of better employment opportunities and working conditions (Alston and Kent 2009; Geldens 2007). Farming has never been a soft option, with farmers working long hours and weekends (Page and Fragar 2002). Farming is an industry with no designated retirement age (Kennedy *et al.* 2014), an industry where workers have traditionally died with their boots on (Mendham and Curtis 2010). For farmers, agrarian ideology and identity, farm knowledge, inheritance and patriarchal succession practices transmitted through several generations (usually from father to son), form the main features of an Australian farming cultural tradition (Gray and Phillips 2001). As a result, farming practices, values and beliefs remain relevant to later generations. Locally derived knowledge is transmitted to later generations of males and so forms a basis for farm operations, and gives hegemonic support to a significant aspect of farm tradition. Research by Alston (2004, 2011) highlights that farming wives are complicit in this, as they foster and maintain this cultural narrative.

There is compelling evidence that rural Australians, particularly older men, face critical health disadvantages (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010, 2012). Mental health is of particular concern (Alston 2010; Horton, Hanna and Kelly 2010; Inder, Berry and Kelly 2011). Thus, farmers are more likely to experience moderate to severe psychological distress than other workers (Brumby *et al.* 2012) and are at a higher risk of committing suicide (Inder, Berry and Kelly 2011; Judd *et al.* 2006), particularly during times of significant farming stress (Alston 2010).

Across developed countries, there are few services available to respond to this growing crisis (United Nations 2002), and this lack has been identified as impacting negatively on farmers' capacity to age well (Horton, Hanna and Kelly 2010; McColl 2007). Some have suggested that these challenges are exacerbated by a rural culture which values independence, stoicism, resilience and self-reliance (Winterton and Warburton 2011). This discourse of personal responsibility is also consistent with current government policy focused on minimising the costs associated with meeting the service needs of a rapidly ageing population. The lack of appropriate service response is palpable for the ageing rural population, subject to the vagaries of economic and social change as well as the challenges of weather and climate change in the harsh Australian context. For ageing farmers with no next generation to follow, their desire to age-on-farm, as their ancestors have done, may not be a reality. They are at serious risk of poor mental health and increasing social isolation (*e.g.* Bartlett *et al.* 2013; Cattán *et al.* 2005; Walker *et al.* 2013; Wenger and Burholt 2004). This all suggests the

urgency of better understanding how older farming men respond to these challenges in order to age well.

Research conducted during Australia's 'worst drought on record' (2002–2010) highlighted some of the negative impacts facing older male farmers. These included declining physical ability, loss of identity, decreased confidence in decision making, challenges faced leaving the farm, managing succession and chronic financial strain, all of which can hinder health and wellbeing and increase the risk of mental health problems (Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health 2007; Fraser *et al.* 2005; Kennedy *et al.* 2014; Sartore *et al.* 2008). In the years post-drought, these concerns have not declined, indeed they may have worsened. A critical reason for this is the cultural significance of farming to the identity of Australian farmers.

Representing bush life as the centre of Australianness is a long-standing tradition (Bell 2005; Gray and Phillips 2001), with the meaning of being Australian, particularly a rural Australian, expressed in songs, art, poetry, novels and other media in the form of the 'pioneer legend' (e.g. the art of McCubbin, Roberts; the poetry of Mackellar, Paterson, Lawson; Facey's novel; songs such as *Waltzing Matilda*). McCubbin's triptych, *The Pioneer*, idolises the bush and the pioneer spirit. Paterson's poem, *The Man from Snowy River*, depicts a 'romantic' view of the adventure of Australian bush life as he conveys the optimism and stoicism of the pioneers amid the hardships of life in the bush. Mackellar's iconic poem, *My Country*, speaks of a challenging land, cruel and unpredictable. Yet for all its harshness, it provides an innate connection to the land for those who call it home.

These cultural texts aim to encourage feelings of Australianness as well as to reproduce and reinforce ideas of what it is to be Australian. The myth of the rural battler is based on the image of the bushmen of the last century, a white Anglo-Saxon male – the semi-nomadic drovers, shearers, swagmen, bullock drivers, boundary riders, stockmen, station hands and others in the pastoral industry (Barr 2002; Ward 1992). The pioneer legend is arguably one of the most enduring and powerful Australian national myths. Thus, Australian artists drew on aspects of rural cultural life in their paintings, demonstrating their love of the land in their pictures of bush life – images of eucalypt bush populated with heroic male pioneers, hard workers and acts of commitment to farming in the face of loss. They painted scenes of building houses and fences, of droving, rounding up stock, farming and shearing amid a landscape characterised as 'sunburnt', sparse and sprawling (Barr and Cary 1992).

Although these images reflected the lives of only a small minority of people in the past, the values and key ideas represented in these works have given meaning to living in the bush with their overtones of 'heroic grandeur and nobility' (Clark 1985: 128). These cultural texts have

remained important as they tell successive generations of Australians that being Australian is about love of the land and hard work, clear values depicted in these works. Images of earthy characters, who shared the virtues of mateship, resourcefulness and hard work, idolised the bush and the pioneer spirit but, more importantly, depicted what was seen as not only quintessentially Australian, but more specifically, what it is to be a farmer.

This image is highly significant, as it is located in past experiences, but more importantly, it impacts the present, and colours ideas of how farming men should behave. The socio-cultural discourses of the farmer are highly pervasive, and include the prevailing cultural script of being seen as a *good* farmer inclusive of hard work, ties to the land and importance of family particularly in terms of hegemonic inheritance practices (Silvasti 2003; Vanclay, Silvasti and Howden 2007). In many ways, rural society, particularly earlier generations of farmers and their ‘exemplary life stories’ or ‘culturally exalted narratives, based on real or fictitious lives’ (Spector-Mersel 2006: 72) has supplied male farmers with brave and determined stories of personal perseverance in ‘battling’ the bush and a harsh climate. The past has provided farmers with a narrative map of ageing, one that involves ageing-on-farm, surrounded by a younger generation. However, this map is highly problematic, based as it is on traditional gendered roles and outmoded scripts of behaviour and expectations that provide the core of farming identity and masculinities (Alston 2010; Ní Laoire 2005; Ramirez-Ferrero 2005). It no longer provides contemporary farmers with a future direction or narrative for ageing well, leaving older farmers to struggle as they deal with a dramatically shifting environment, facing challenges such as climate-related adversity, the reducing numbers of farmers, particularly young farmers, and the overall worsening economic climate as they try to sell their properties. Each of these factors not only increases the pressures on baby-boom farmers, but also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of keeping ageing farmers on the land.

## **The research**

### *Methodology*

This study is informed by the work of narrative sociologists, Gubrium and Holstein (2008; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). A constructionist lifecourse approach (Gubrium and Holstein 1999), with a narrative ethnographic perspective, was used in order to understand how farming men articulate their identity as they age (Gubrium 1995; Gullette 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 2007; Phoenix and Griffin 2013). This approach allowed for an

understanding of how the lifecourse is constructed and *used* discursively to confer meaning on experience in relation to the passage of time (Holstein and Gubrium 2007). As Paul Ricoeur notes, we are 'tangled up in stories' (1991: 30). Thus, the aim of this research was to show this entanglement, or complexity of narratives, in order to develop an understanding of the participants' experiences of ageing in their everyday lives. It is through their stories that we derive access to the meanings associated with ageing for this group of male farmers.

### *Research design and method*

This paper comprises part of a larger study, which involved a narrative ethnography based on interviews and observation of nine male farmers, recruited through snowballing and a reference group (O'Callaghan 2014). These strategies provided a way of accessing existing networks of people sharing similar experiences by 'allowing the process to proceed to a deeper, more shared experience as each respondent identifies a neighbour or a friend, and the collective study becomes a living, dynamic process' (Stehlik 2004: 43). Ethical clearance to conduct the research was provided by La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Human Ethics Committee (FHEC10/130) and involved seeking informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Thus, in this paper, names have been changed, and any identifiable descriptors removed.

To understand the experience of baby-boomer farmers, all participants were born between 1946 and 1955 (first-wave baby boom) (Ozanne 2009). They were at least second-generation farmers and currently living and working on the land. All came from the border country of the Murray River, which encompasses two Australian states, southern New South Wales and northern Victoria, with substantial agricultural and horticultural production (mixed crops, sheep, cattle, fruit, wine grapes and nuts). This area has experienced drier and hotter conditions over recent decades, including a number of severe droughts. There are also large expanses of dryland broadacre farming as well as irrigated food production. However, due to changes in agricultural productivity in terms of trade, all farming types in this region have been challenged to 'get big or get out' as they experience pressures to enlarge their acreages in order to remain viable financially (Barr 2009). The research took place in 2010–11, at the conclusion of major drought, which was followed by flooding rains, plagues of locusts and mice. The research was conducted in several phases including initial interviews, followed by days of observation and finally follow-up interviews (in some cases up to ten months later). All interviews were conducted in the participants' home over three to four hours.

The opening question of ‘tell me about your life on the farm’ meant that the focus of the initial interview was on the everyday life and experience of the participant.

### *Participants*

This paper focuses on stories told by three of the nine farmers, within the narrative environment of farming and ageing. The stories of three participants, Cliff, Neville and Len, were chosen for this paper based on their experience of ageing without a future generation to farm their land. None of the three participants had children returning to the farm. All three participants left school early to work on the farm and all are now running the family farm themselves. Cliff, a 56-year-old, second-generation bachelor farmer lives on his father’s block, and works this in combination with the original family farm established in the 1880s. He has no children to leave the farm to when he dies, but lives with a brother with intellectual disabilities ‘who is of no help’ (Cliff) and a sister ‘who does not leave the kitchen’ (Cliff). Neville is a married, 61-year-old, third-generation farmer, who lives on his father’s home farm of 800 acres and leases a further 500 acres. His family have been farming in the area since 1919. Neville faces a constant struggle to remain profitable. He has been on government relief since the drought, although these payments are now under threat. Neville had discouraged his son and three daughters from farming, suggesting that other occupations provided them with a more certain income and easier physical working life. Len, a 63-year-old, third-generation farmer, has a long family history in the area dating back to 1909. He farms on 1,300 acres and lives with his wife. His two sons live and work away from the farm and have chosen not to return. They come home during their holidays to help in busy times. Len lived in silent hope of one of his sons returning to continue farming. Neville and Len’s wives, although not interviewed, performed traditional female/wifely duties (Alston 2011). They presented as content to ‘cook, clean and care for their men’ (Mary, Len’s wife), ageing relatives and children.

### *Analytical framework*

Narrative literature highlights the usefulness of story representation as a subject for analysis; however, there is an identified lack of tools for researchers to undertake this process (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). In the broader study, the farmers’ stories were analysed using several frames. The first phase provided a broad framework around the theoretical perspectives of the narrating self and lifecourse which comprised three central

narratives – the gendered ageing self (focusing on the performance of a gendered identity), the ageing good farmer self (emphasising how the vocabularies of the ‘good’ farmer are storied in the context of ageing) and the successfully ageing farmer self (paying attention to how farmers *use* the everyday events in their lives to make their own meanings of ageing). The last, the successfully ageing farmer self, is the focus of this paper.

The second level of analysis allowed for an analysis of the processes or the narrative practices of the participants. This provides an understanding of how storytellers retain a sense of self amid change. It not only focuses on the complexity and crafting of the individual narrative, but on its difference and coherence. Concepts from the work of Gubrium and Holstein (1997, 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000), such as *narrative work* and *narrative practice* inclusive of *narrative linkage, footing, shift, editing* and *control*, enabled a deeper understanding of identity. It also shows that identity is not a static construct passively encompassing conceptual tools such as scripts, roles and values, but is actively negotiated and managed on an ongoing basis. This conceptualisation allows an understanding of how the concepts of ageing and masculinity are negotiated in everyday talk in order to manage the narrative self. Narrative tension can be heard as the farmers ‘work’, and often struggle, to revise and regain control of their emerging stories in order to manage change. When faced with threats to their farming identity it is through their narrative work that they demonstrate how the farmer self is contested, reshaped and renegotiated.

By applying these theoretical perspectives to the stories told by these three farmers, it can be understood how a number of core identity dilemmas occur for these men, challenged by their loss of specific masculine and farming identities and the prospect of ageing without a next generation to follow. Findings show how these three farmers face these losses and attempt to construct a narrative map for their future as older farmers.

### **Findings – future pressures for ageing farming men**

By using fragments from the stories of Cliff, Neville and Len, it can be seen that a threatened loss of identity, loneliness and isolation, and not having a next generation to hand the farm on to, poses challenges as they age. Pride in the family’s past becomes a burden for the farmer self, a burden that farmers cannot shed, as they struggle to narrate a life beyond farming. Despite suggesting they might retire, they are very reluctant to leave a life that has given them purpose, a personally and socially valued self. Thus, tensions often occur within their narratives as they work to produce coherence in what can, at times, be seen as a contradictory telling. What is striking



about these excerpts from their stories is that despite the farmers' differing life experiences, they all use narrative linkages to key cultural constructs in the composition of their story, that is, good farming, hard work and success. They establish a firm narrative footing in these themes in order to provide the listener with the 'kinds of stories that will be told' (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). These narratives are foregrounded rather than alternative stories of the physical challenges of uncertain futures and ageing bodies, often evident through the ethnographic process. Narrative linkages operate at the beginning of their stories, acting as a 'preface' to what is about to unfold. The linkages, developed and articulated throughout their stories, bring together different events into a coherent whole.

### *Loss of identity*

Farming for these men provides a strong social identity to the point that when deciding whether or not to sell up and retire, they face a double challenge. This includes leaving their home, the farm that may have been in the family for several generations, on which they grew up and know intimately. The farm also provides an occupation that they have pursued all their working lives and to which they feel called. This dual challenge is expressed by Cliff:

I'll just keep going I guess until I can't. No I don't want to move into town. What would I do in town? Read the paper. Not interested in travelling much ... ah ... maybe sell bit by bit. There're properties for sale everywhere now. I can't sell I suppose. What else will I do ... other than farming? I don't go fishing. I'm 55. I don't want to build houses so much ... I'm too old to go rousing in shearing sheds, I guess while I'm here the show goes on.

Many farmers delay making such decisions, and talk of 'being rooted in the land' (Neville), displaying a deep, embodied emotional attachment to place and farming identity. Indeed, these farmers know nothing else, having devoted their whole lives to life on the land.

Part of their reluctance to leave the land can be understood by reflecting on how older Australian farmers strongly adhere to the Australian bush pioneering identity, with its deeply entrenched ideological beliefs and social norms of rural masculinity. These qualities are so embedded in the culture of family farming, in the construction of a farmer identity, that they still are evident in their narratives of the present. This culture not only provides a firm footing for their stories, but also guidelines of appropriate behaviour. Again Cliff illustrates:

Sheep are all I know ... all I can do ... I can tip over sheep, I can pick sheep out. I won't let an agent on the property ... I do it myself. I don't want his opinion. I want mine. The old man said 'if you need someone to help you or make the decisions for

you, you shouldn't have a farm' ... which I believe to be correct. I take great pride in sending lambs to market and that sort of thing.

He frequently highlighted what a good farmer he is, a successful farmer who has survived the last years of drought when others around him have been forced to leave:

We're still here ... I can run this farm. I haven't run it at a loss. I haven't made too many mistakes that embarrass me ... Few people can run farms like I can ... we're not in debt ... We're the only ones here; every neighbour has changed except one. So what does that tell you? What does that mean? All the local know-it-alls have gone ... but I'm still here.

Despite this show of bravado, observation of Cliff's farm shows evidence of neglect with the previous year's rice crop left unharvested. He attempts to salvage a valued sense of self. He faces a lonely, uncertain future with no children to follow him and has become a bitter narrator of his farming life. However, he attempts to maintain control of his narrative of survival and endurance, by suggesting that he has not made the mistakes that other farmers have by over-borrowing and getting into unmanageable debt. He also tries to minimise the risk of damage to the coherence of the self, as he tells of intending to stay on the farm as he ages.

The past is ever present in Len's narrative. Driving around the farm while surveying damage from the floods and from recent rain, Len told stories of his ancestors. He proudly worked on the repairs to the old shearing shed, built in 1890, despite experiencing physical difficulties. This shed represents for Len his history and the hard work that went with it. The great interior beams cut from old red gums felled on the property are 'as sturdy as when they were erected' (Len). On one of these supporting posts is a list of ringers' names etched into the wood from 1890 to 1975. Len argues for the value in maintaining the old shed. Like Cliff, Len narrates the value of independence and hard work, despite experiencing chronic asthma and debilitating physical problems:

It's important to keep in working order ... I still do it all myself ... we (my brother and I) do all the shed work during shearing ourselves ... I work harder than dad did ... my brother is a bit of a fiddler ... I started to build a new shed mid-2000 but couldn't afford to finish it ... not worth it now as if I sell it the new owner can use it as a machinery shed or to store grain ... it will always be useful.

The new shed was meant to replace the old shearing shed, however, like the dishevelled outbuildings around the farm, he has 'never quite got around to replacing them or pulling them down'. It is a link to the past, a reminder of his and his ancestors' lifetime of hard physical labour. By linking this object in his story, he metaphorically gives meaning to his resilience and strength. Like the shed, Len's farming life will go on despite all the hurdles. He

cannot see himself retiring into town, despite his financial struggles and lack of help on the farm.

Len's desire to remain an active farmer into later life can be located within wider socio-cultural narratives regarding the ageing process (that is, those of decline and deterioration) and of those associated with the culture of farming where older farmers are seen as less able and weaker. The implications can be seen not only in Len's notions about work and growing older but also in his values and perceptions of masculinity. Getting older for Len is a masculine business in which an embodied understanding of one's self can be backgrounded or ignored because farming men must maintain their physical strength, control and independence regardless of age or illness:

I saw father slow down in between 60 and 68 ... to the point where it's – bugger it, I don't do that. I see other farmers around that are trying to hang on and they're not putting any crop in and they're ... just doing the real take easy. Their farm is falling down around them ... where the value of their asset is going down ... not building it up ... I'm working harder than I was 20 years ago ... I keep fit so I am able to keep walking around. Watch my diet, weight and recreation. I don't risk injury ... you can make it hard for yourself. But I can still keep my hand in here hopefully til [I'm] well into my seventies. Maybe I can keep bees ... It's about control.

Len's comments, like those of the others, are a reminder that farmers 'hang on' in a rural culture, despite showing age-related physical challenges when out and about on the farm. By being able to regain narrative control over what is an ageing body, he hopes to be able to retain his farming identity and alleviate concerns of a feared future, life after the farm. As Ní Laoire (2005) illustrates, farming masculinities demand control and tenacity during periods of difficult physical and economic conditions. Getting older for Len is a masculine business in which an embodied understanding of oneself can be backgrounded or ignored because, as Ní Laoire points out, men must maintain their physical strength, control and independence, and this is regardless of age or illness.

Work-centred values of midlife are used as a reference point in their identity construction, where their bodies struggle to live up to masculinities of the rural context. Rural culture has traditionally centred on 'physically defined masculinities' and the 'heroisation of the work-hardened bodies of men' (Brandth and Haugen 2005: 16). This identity is centred on a self that values physical fitness and ruggedness. With ageing it becomes increasingly difficult to perform masculinity in these ways, as all participants demonstrated signs of wear and tear from years of hard physical labour. This was evident through the ethnographic observations, where the farmers were showing visible signs of ageing bodies. As Len explains:

I come into the house more often than before. I get backache so I have to rest. I go to bed earlier. My brother does most of the harvest and I do the carting ... sitting in trucks and tractors is hard on your back. My health is getting worse. The dust from tractor isn't good for my asthma. I've been told I have to retire earlier by the surgeon.

However, despite recognising he will have to retire due to ill health, Len predicts instead that he 'won't retire into local community as not much going on ... so maybe better to stay put'.

Cliff's narrative is also constructed around a presentation of a physically strong, hard-working farmer self:

All farm work is hard. You've got to have a passion for it ... farming is something I see as you're bred for it ... you've got to be prepared to work hard, any day of the week, including Christmas Day. You used to have small tractors, you carried everything on your back ... today the young ones have tractors as big as this room. We never had that. But physical work and getting up early and that don't worry me ... I'm physically strong ... always been able to do it ... I'm sure you work harder than a lot of people in town. I always worked long hours, still do.

Cliff maintains narrative control of the strong, male farmer identity, choosing not to mention how he no longer does a lot of cropping, as it involves long hours on heavy machinery and he finds it difficult to climb on and off. As in Len and Neville's narrative, the linkages made to hard work provided an anchor for Cliff's self and the organisation of his life story.

Hard work can be seen as a discursive resource that is *used* to deflect any negative assumptions made about their character/identity as an older farming man – 'what I have done is who I am' – an attempt to articulate a continuity in identity as they face an uncertain future. Their past defines who they are in the present, their self-presentation as working men is defined by their tough and strong work character and not by age. They gloss over age-related physical issues. However, this also demonstrates their resistance to change, probably because they have more to lose – images and stories of young, active lads. They are so socialised into the stories of hard physical work, attachment to the land and belonging to the land that they have difficulty finding an alternative map for the future. They fear life after farming, of losing their male farming identity, with associated demands and dominant values of productive, hard work.

For Neville, his life of hard work is changing. In his narrative, he abruptly shifts his working self into the background and his narrative of struggle to the foreground. For him, there is a constant battle to remain profitable and he is worried what will happen when the government drought payments stop. His main interest was always farming, but:

[I]t's starting to rub off. It's become tough the last few years. I still enjoy it all but our returns are low. We're not generating the income we should and therefore you can't

do the things you should do ... and the regulation we have to go through. But I am still working, maybe not the way I used, I'm slowing down ... but I'm still working long hours when I'm sowing or something like that. I run a thousand acres by myself and do my own shearing.

Neville continually edits his story in a way that shows that he is not narratively 'frozen', having limited narrative resources and so imposing boundaries on his emerging story (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). As an editor, he modifies and revises his emerging story as he attempts to negotiate the external problems facing both his working self and his ageing self. Disappointments and frustrations have made Neville question his relationship to the land and farming, as he struggles to resolve the tension in his narrative of an economically viable farm.

Farming men present conflicting images about the realities of their everyday lives. They strongly portray themselves as emotionally tough, hardy and independent, a portrait built on a legacy of masculine strength. At the same time, however, this can result in isolation, hardship, and poor mental and physical health. The pioneer legend and the Australian bush provide the narrative environment for these ageing male farmers. Their narrative linkages to attachment to land and farming help them adjust to changing circumstances and remind them why they are still struggling to stay on the farm. Despite all the difficulties they face, the land provides succour, it is there, and it is 'knowable' while the future is unknowable and uncertain. It represents a lifetime's work, and plays a central part, a solid narrative footing for their story. However, it is highly challenging as they face an ageing future, a lonely future without a next generation for the farm.

### *No one in the wings*

What is evident for these farmers, as they battle to keep up with the physical work on their farms, is that the social part of their lives is often neglected. They can become lonely and isolated, as Neville describes when his son-in-law left the region:

We worked together in a loose sort of partnership. We shared everything. I find it lonelier now. It's harder to keep going ... like finishing a job, leaving it, coming back to it. I guess it comes with getting older...

New rural property owners are less likely to be farmers by occupation, and more likely to live and work off farm (Mendham and Curtis 2010). This is a point made by Len, who notes that, 'you never see them around. They don't know how to run farms properly or look after the land'. These older farmers feel the isolation from farming others, and have diminished energy to engage. For farming men, a sense of belonging is the experience of being

integrated and involved within their farming community. When this occurs they feel valued and needed. When it does not occur they feel alone and isolated. As Len points out, 'most of the time I don't feel like going anywhere ... I'd rather just stay home with [wife] Mary'. Where once Len had other farming men to interact with (at stock sales, across boundary fences and along country lanes), he now relies on his wife who, like other farming wives, provide the unrecognised responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of farming men (Alston 2011).

The challenges associated with ageing were exacerbated by the fact that for these three ageing farmers, there was no younger generation to whom they could hand over the reins. Their feelings of attachment to the land and a sense of rootedness offered the familiar, a place of safety, particularly when faced with an uncertain future. For Neville, the image of himself as a good male farmer has to be continuously worked at and reinforced in his life story and this is evidenced in his narration of his son's decision not to be a farmer. He feels let down even though he actively discouraged his son from becoming a farmer:

I didn't encourage him to stay. I encouraged him away to be a fitter and machinist. When he finished year 12 he came home for a few months before he got an apprenticeship ... then he went. But he didn't want to come back, not really ... he said, I've seen the way you work Dad and I don't want to work that hard.

Despite his talk, Neville holds on to the dream that one day he will be able to hand the farm over to the next generation. He points out a good site for a new home for his son when he returns and at other times explains why he is not disposing of machinery, no longer used but 'may come in handy should he come home' (Neville). Succession is important, and whilst all three know that there are no children coming home to the farm, their narratives are still strongly linked to the hope of family farming into the future.

A farmers' sense of belonging acts as a shield against the fear of not being needed, valued and significant within their farming environment. Their narratives are dominated by the presentation of someone who is recognised and valued locally thereby visibly keeping active, busy, productive and connected, all central tenets for ageing well. This is particularly evident in Neville's narrative as he physically and economically struggles to keep the farm that his family has farmed since 1919 viable. Neville's choice of occupation, and being from a very old family in the area, provides Neville with recognition. He identifies as a successful local farmer – one strongly identified with the land, with a long proud history. Thus, Neville's self is presented and managed. Like the other farmers whose children are not returning, he establishes a firm footing in his story of community recognition:

I know all the local families in town ... I can go to town with no wallet and no money and deal at a shop where I don't have an account and I can walk in and pick something up ... and they'll say how much is that? Oh \$50 ... I can walk out of the shop with it and they won't ask me if I'm going to pay for it ... they know if they send me a bill I'll pay for it. They know who I am ... If I go down the coast on holidays ... I've nearly got to show my licence to buy a newspaper ... I've got to pay cash ... My family has been here since 1919. I'm in a few organisations in town ... I'm known. Even when we retire farmers still stay a 'farmer'. It's about identification ... ties to the land. They will say my people had land at X, we came off the land ... and why do we do that? It's about connection, where you came from. It's important to be around community. It's important for your health and your mind. It stimulates your mind ... and it's about having a network of people who will care for you and look after you.

However, as they age, it becomes increasingly more difficult to live up to society's ideal of what a male farmer should be. As Neville notes, his growing sense of isolation is also the loss of community recognition as he ages, saying that 'it's hard when you've been someone ... to see people you know ... and, well, sort of ... realise they think you're on the way out'.

The lifecourse farming scripts of the past are no longer applicable in the present and future. Spector-Mersel (2006) highlights that there is an absence of lifecourse scripts that men can use as they age, to understand their situation, particularly in mid-life. They are offered 'never-ageing scripts'; ones that, she argues, are incomplete because what were once distinct models of dignified ageing become vague, 'even non-existent, when referring to later life' (Spector-Mersel 2006: 73). Not having cultural guidelines of how to be 'both a "true" man and an aging person', Spector-Mersel highlights, 'constitutes the context within which older men struggle to build acceptable identities' (2006: 68), no more so than when farming men age. It is within the farmer's stories that we can see the narrative work they must do in order to create coherence to their story of masculinity and ageing and thus maintenance of an acceptable social identity.

## **Discussion**

These findings suggest that ageing is a challenging issue for farmers such as Cliff, Neville and Len in the contemporary context, particularly in a society that through its early pioneering history set up the narrative environment of the good farmer which limits their emerging narratives of ageing. Through the lens of successful ageing and good farming, the choice of farmers to remain on the farm, to age-in-place, living rurally would seem a desirable policy outcome, in fact a necessary one, given the policy agenda. However,

findings in this study show that this option is highly problematic for farmers such as these three farmers, who face ageing in the challenging contemporary rural environment without a next generation waiting in the wings.

This study offers important insights into the clear tensions, contradictions and rapid changes impacting ageing farmers, and how this is mapped out in their stories as they struggle to produce coherence in what they recount. Through using narrative linkages to key cultural constructs (Gubrium and Holstein 1998), we show the reflexive interplay between lived experience and material realities as these farmers undoubtedly struggle to maintain their identity as their bodies age, their farms decline and they face a future without generational succession.

While there are limitations to this research, and particularly that the study focuses on just three men all within one Australian region, these findings resonate with other international research, such as that of Silvasti (2003) and Heenan (2006). This suggests that the broad scenario is not unique to Australia, despite specific socio-economic and cultural issues. Further, the study's strength is that it utilises a strong theoretical frame through use of a narrative approach to data collection and analysis, as outlined by Gubrium and Holstein (1997, 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Thus, by exploring the narrative work and narrative practice amongst these three individuals, we can begin to understand the difficulties faced by farming men as they age in today's rural socio-economic context.

There are significant implications from these findings. Rural policy must consider the challenges of retirement to older farmers and the impact on their sense of self when the future is so uncertain, and they can neither sell the farm nor hand down to the next generation. Whilst current policy is to accept farmers walking off the land (Bryant and Garnham 2013), this is fraught with danger given the emotional cost to farmers, and particularly high farmer suicide and psychological distress (Alston 2010; Brumby *et al.* 2012). Whether they leave or have to stay on the farm and soldier on has implications for rural communities undergoing critical socio-economic change. Thus, this same policy must also take into account the impact of change on rural communities, particularly as members of farming families are known for having a great sense of community connectedness and loyalty to their industry (as is highlighted in the farmers' narratives).

As an occupational group, findings highlight that farmers find it difficult to distance themselves from the physical, emotional and cognitive farmer identity and establish a new role identity. Resistance to change may be due to their very strong narrative connections with traditional masculine rural ideologies and the subconscious need for masculine ideals to be preserved within the cultural norms of the heroic male pioneer (Coldwell 2010;



Ward 1992). Within these ideologies there are no clear cultural guidelines, or map, as to how to be an ageing male farmer minus a younger generation, so this group of men cling to the old familiar narratives they know in order to maintain respectability as the age. As Spector-Mersel argues, they are turning their life histories into 'self-defining stories' (McAdams 1993) and this is dangerous for maintaining good mental health in the future.

Successful ageing encompasses ageing with dignity; inclusive of good health, financial security, independence, self-fulfilment, personal safety and security. There is a fine line between the duty of care and dignity of risk when we speak of older farmers. Society has a duty to assist all people to age successfully, through provision of services and support systems. Many farmers, however, choose to age in remote rural areas without that support. While this choice is risky, it allows maintenance of dignity (Rogers *et al.* 2013). Dignity, however, is challenged most by lack of appropriate support services, within an environment of rural resource rationalisation (Cocklin and Dibden 2002). Findings in the present study highlight the tensions between the discourse of successful ageing and being an older farmer, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of keeping ageing farmers on the land.

## **Conclusion**

This research has shown the potential of narrative approaches for studying farming, identity and ageing, and signals the possibilities of further research using this methodology to explore how others cope with change as they age in late modernity. While this study has focused on male farmers, research that includes the stories of farmers' wives and children is also needed. There are a growing number of widowed and ageing women who age alone on farms with little research that focuses on their experiences. More research is needed into farmers' responses to the challenges facing them, particularly as this study has highlighted that the impact of change on a new generation of ageing rural men, women and their families is unknown. Participants' accounts often encapsulate a sense of precariousness about what lies ahead.

## **Acknowledgements**

Ethical clearance to conduct the research was provided by La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Human Ethics committee (FHEC10/130).

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*Accepted 17 September 2015; first published online 25 November 2015*

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