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NEW FARMING MASCULINITIES:

**“More Than Just Shit-Kickers”, we’re “Switched-On” Farmers
wanting To “Balance Lifestyle, Sustainability and Coin”.**

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Abstract

Studies have suggested that traditional gender identity constructions of farmers tend to accompany conventional methods of farming and so are implicated in stalling the transition to sustainable agriculture. This paper attempts to build on this work by exploring how young male farmers construct their masculine identities and how those identity constructions shape and are shaped by their farming practices and the social conditions in which those farming practices are carried out. Reflexivity is a significant part of this process. This exploratory study is based on focus group discussions conducted in one locality in Northern Victoria, among young male dairy farmers. Analysis of the findings supports the existence of a traditional-modern dualism in rural masculine identities. What is also evident is that more open and flexible masculine identities are emerging among young farmers, suggesting that existing tensions in agriculture situated at the nexus of alternative farming practices and traditional agrarian ideology might be a catalyst for change toward more equitable gender relations and sustainable ways of farming.

Keywords: masculinity; sustainable farming; reflexivity; monologue; dialogue; social conditions.

Word count 8220

Introduction

“It’s bad enough as it is without the drought. We are competing in an overseas market when the rest of ‘em are subsidised and we’re not so it makes it pretty tough and we haven’t got enough domestic market like them countries and so we have to send it over there and take what they give us for it. If we were on a level playing field with them we’d kick their arse but we’re not soum.....getting back to the price and where our product goes we just get jammed by everythin’ else like we’ve been competing against a market with bench markers and everythin’ but the cost of everythin’ else is goin’ up in this country like our inputs, water and power and grain so yeah it makes it tough and well like I just read in the Weekly Times before I come here where there was 570 dairy farmers have shut down business in the last eight months”. (Terry)

The current structural conditions of farming coupled with a rhetoric of economic efficiency means that farmers are expected to increase production at the same time as the natural environment continues to degrade. This contradiction is now increasingly questioned as many realise that the key to sustainability lies in changing farming practices. As a result a number of the institutionalised norms that lie at the core of dominant conventional farming practices and gender relations are challenged. One of them is masculinity; another is industrial agriculture and its discourse. It has been suggested that the struggle to survive in farming is for many men a struggle to maintain their masculine identity and therefore a large number still identify as traditional farmers and traditional men. However recent research suggests that

alternative masculinities are beginning to emerge alongside the turn toward alternative forms of farming practice.

There is evidence in the literature suggesting that a fundamental way to move forward in the difficult business of agriculture is to cultivate new identities and new ways of farming in a culture of diversity and dialogue. In a study of the sustainable agriculture movement in Iowa, Peter, Bell, Jarnagin and Bauer (2000) used the distinction between monologic and dialogic masculinity traits as a way of identifying differences in constructions of masculinity between conventional farmers and sustainable agriculture farmers. By unpacking the ways in which farming practices and identity construction shape and are shaped each by the other it is possible to gain an understanding of the ways in which the cultivation of farming is really about a cultivation of the self (Bell, 2004). Gaining new knowledge in this way opens up possibilities for positive changes to the lives of farmers and the sustainability of the ways in which they farm and live.

This paper seeks to extend the literature through a study of young male dairy farmers in northern Victoria. The paper is presented in four parts. The first section briefly outlines a theoretical perspective in which modern day farming and identity might be located. The second section considers some empirical findings from studies on masculinities and farming practices in relation to gender identities and their construction. The third section presents and analysis findings from one section of a broader study. This section of the study considers the trajectory from constructions of the tough traditional farmer toward new more dialogic farming masculinities. Finally I draw some conclusions in comparisons of that analysis with findings of earlier studies.

Reflexivity: Locating Farming and Identity.

Modern industrial farming can be located within a theoretical perspective as a social enterprise that has shifted from local contexts of interaction to the global stage. This is reflected in a general ideological shift in world agriculture from the traditional to the modern (Ni Laoire, 2002). The industrialisation of agriculture introduced a commercial variant of the romantic agrarian mythology whose fundamental virtues of independence, hard work and self reliance were transformed into individualism, maximum production, technical efficiency and innovation (Walter, 1997:49).

This shift is explained by Beck, in his *Risk Society* (1992) and Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) who have argued that as industrial societies continue to develop, a number of consequences arise. For instance technological expertise now has to be used as a tool in moderating the effects upon the environment of earlier applications of science and technology. The industrial society becomes risk society where individuals must now negotiate the social and environmental risks that industry and science have created.

Accompanying this transformation is an increasing development of a process of individualisation (Beck, 1992) or detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1990) whereby individuals are liberated from traditional ties of family, locality and social class. This process of liberation is accompanied by a loss of stability. The traditional securities of practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms are broken down in the process of

liberation. Following liberation individuals are reintegrated into new forms of social commitment, what Beck (1992: 128) has termed the 'control' dimension.

Beck (1994: 5, 6) uses the concept of "individualization" to understand the construction of biography. Individualisation like detraditionalisation is a process producing structurally necessitated self-reflexivity as tradition is increasingly challenged by new knowledge. As the social norms of industrialisation (shaped by expert information) and the realities of lived experiences become increasingly contradictory, reflexivity begins and forces 'self-confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society'.

In dialogical terms reflexive modernisation occurs as the rhetoric of economic efficiency is countered by the emergence of alternative knowledges from citizens' initiative groups which 'distrust' expert systems (Beck, 1992:185) or in Giddens' (1994: 184-197) view from individuals who have a shifting trust in expert systems and increasing unease over scientific research's privileged claim to truth. Institutional reflexivity sees the propositions of these expert knowledge systems transformed from their universal validity into more democratic and dialogical public spheres of contestation. In this process traditional meanings of knowledge derived from a formerly sacrosanct science are disembedded from their local context by social actors in everyday interaction and transformed to 'dialogic expert knowledge' which is shared across time and space (Beck et al. 1994:203).

In order to articulate a consensual view of the meaning of individualisation, Beck reminds us that it does not imply or provide a new found freedom by emancipating the personal uniqueness of the individual. Neither does it mean that we have to be isolated or disconnected from society:

‘Individualisation means, first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves. Thus the name individualisation’ (Beck, 1994: 13)

For Beck (1992), individualisation occurs simultaneously with ‘standardisation’, a process whereby biographies become standardised and more uniform across national and international contexts. While individualisation is about self-reflexivity in determining how we live, it is also about institutional control and standardisation of biographies. In the fields of farming this can be understood in terms of the integration mechanisms and scientific principles of industrial agriculture which have facilitated the standardisation of farming practices, and arguably the identities of farmers as they exchange the commitments and support relationships of tradition for the constraints and insecurities of the market place manifest in multi-national agribusiness conglomerates and a world agri-food system.

The theory of reflexivity therefore is posed as one of both enablement and constraint depending on people’s location in a given social order. Detraditionalisation or individualisation can be seen on the one hand as one of enablement as Giddens (1990) suggests, where modern life allows a greater degree of self reflection and choice in ways of living that if taken to its ultimate conclusion promises some kind of post modern utopia. On the other hand, according to Beck’s (1992) interpretation, individualisation theory can be seen as one of constraint where the structures of control, which change in modernisation and force self-reflection, at the same time, inhibit self-reflection or at least the ability to act as a consequence of it. Beck further

argues that it is the notion of reflexivity as self-determining or self-monitoring embedded in institutional discourse that holds power in that reflexivity itself is part of the discourse. If self-determining reflexivity is embedded in the institutional discourse of farming then it is likely to be embedded also in the agents of that institutional discourse such as extension and technology which serve to perpetuate it. If these agents of discourse can be accessed or reconstructed by alternative discourses then what emerges is a window of potential structural change to the hegemonic institutional discourse of industrial agriculture and therefore the potential for enhanced self-reflexivity and changes in gender constructions and relations at the farm along with farming practices.

Studying Masculinity

To date, the small body of academic work on the relationship between masculinity and farming has focused on identifying competing discourses of masculinity in several fields of inquiry: agricultural media, the family farm and agri-political organizations (Brandth, 1995; Liepins, 2000; Peter, Bell, Jarnagin and Bauer, 2000; Ni Laoire, 2002, 2004; Saugeres 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; Pini, 2004 and the special issue of *Rural Sociology* 2000).

These studies of rural masculinities have served to reveal the necessity for critical analysis of gendered power relations in rural settings (Campbell and Bell, 2000). In deconstructing gender relations in rural settings it becomes possible to expose to rigorous analysis the previously normalised and invisible gendered discourses of farming and leadership in farming organisations by which men have assumed power (Pini, 2004). This research reflects a change in theoretical thinking and approach to

gender studies involving a reinterpretation of an earlier view that masculinities and femininities are gender based ideologies expressed through sex-role theory which sees gender as something “ static and innate” (Kimmel, 1987).

In taking this step, researchers have recognized not just the relational nature of gender construction but also the existence of multiple masculinities played out in interactions between men in different social and spatial contexts. To expand on this Connell (1995), among others, argues amid extensive evidence for the existence of a hierarchy of masculinities which are dynamic and unstable. The most influential and powerful masculinities bestow power, privilege and status upon some men (and women) but it is more usual for men to adopt the postures of hegemonic masculinity or to aspire to them in a complicit way: they participate in the dividends of the gender order. Other men are subordinated to or marginalised by the dominant masculinity in a group or a social order.

Other Concepts of Masculinity: Monologue/Dialogue

Another way of conceptualising masculinity and a window through which hegemonic masculinity can be challenged appears in a model developed by Peter et al. (2000) in a study of the sustainable agriculture movement in Iowa. These scholars found that conventional farmers tend to display more monologic traits of masculinity whereas sustainable farmers display more dialogic masculinity traits. In their findings it is argued that men in particular social conditions display both monologic and dialogic tendencies but that generally some men will display one type more than the other.

This argument is based on a study of the distinction between monologic and dialogic social conditions in the work of Russian social theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, cited in Peter et al. 2000) and the application of dialogue in the work of the Brazilian scholar of pedagogy, Paulo Freire, (1970, cited in Bell, 2003). In monologic form our behaviour tends to disregard others and their opinions, desires, and even their presence in any more than a superficial way. In dialogic conditions on the other hand, we try to take each other into account. We remain open to the needs, concerns and opinions of others. In our language and categories we are not rigid and fixed but reflect an outlook of our place in the social world as an “interactive part of the constantly changing whole” (Peter et al, 2000: 218).

Peter et al. (2000) extended Bakhtin's work as a heuristic device in attempting to understand the cultures of masculinities in agriculture. Social life has its monologic and its dialogic side; so does masculinity. Whilst not claiming that the distinction between monologic and dialogic masculinity describes all features of masculinities, the results of fieldwork in this study suggest that this distinction describes much of the difference in the masculine ideologies of more industrially inclined and more sustainability inclined farmers in Iowa. According to Peter et al. (2000) monologic masculinity is a conventional masculinity with rigid expectations and strictly negotiated performances that provide a clear distinction between men's and women's work. Monologic masculinity also limits the range of topics considered appropriate to discuss, endorses a specific definition of work and success, and sets precise boundaries of manhood.

A different scenario, however, has become more prevalent among male members of the sustainable agriculture movement called the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), who

demonstrate a broader understanding of what it is to be a man. In their study, Peter et al. (2000) have observed that these farmers are “more open to talking about making mistakes, to expressing emotions, to change and criticism, to a less controlling attitude toward machines and the environment, and to different measures of work and success”. In Iowa, the sustainable agriculture movement is seen to be strongly dialogic not only in the social conditions it promotes but also in the social lives of those attracted to it. According to Bell (2004), the sustainable agriculture movement takes on a less individualistic, less categorical, less homogeneous approach to farming, and is more interactive and holistic in outlook by being more open to change and placing emphasis upon ways of farming that attend to, and take into account, the needs of others in society and of the physical environment and is less engaged with and resistant to the rhetoric of economic efficiency which drives industrial agriculture. Therefore the sustainable agriculture movement provides farm men with an arena for discovering and performing a more dialogic masculinity.

The example of the Practical Farmers of Iowa provides empirical evidence of reflexivity enabling agency and the opening up of spaces for alternative identities and ways of farming and living. It is a living example of how reflexivity can lead to challenges to existing institutions and their discourses, facilitating the establishment and development of new institutional structures that farmers can support and be supported by through greater dialogic engagement. It is the cultivation of dialogue and diversity which Bell (2004) suggests is fundamental to the success of sustainable farming and more equitable gender relations. However Bell specifically distances a dialogic approach from reflexive modernization. For Bell the latter is too modernist for what sustainability suggests about current social conditions. Does reflexive modernization bring opportunity for resistance to industrial agriculture or do the

constraining mechanisms of standardisation inhibit resistance whilst at the same time delivering more of the same in terms of a re-embedded highly technologically driven agriculture?

New ways to farm

Bell (2004:17) represents sustainable agriculture as a new cultivation of social practice where the relations of knowledge recognise difference in the ways we experience others and our selves. Recognition of these differences can be used as an enriching source of “learning, vitality and change” rather than a “threat to self and knowledge” as some farmers might see it. In recognising difference, and applying it in such a way, we act dialogically and cultivate dialogue. However Bell (2004) also suggests – and this at least in part explains why more farmers have not turned to sustainable farming – in an uncertain world monologue can be in a sense a refuge in the mind against the loss of a sense of self.

To cultivate new ways of farming means also to construct a new identity, a new sense of self. It is difficult to maintain a sense of who we are if all around us is uncertain, as it surely is in farming today. In this context industrial agriculture “offers to listeners the monologic comfort of its universal claim to truth, secured on high in the laboratory and in the market” (Bell, 2004: 17). In theoretical terms Bell (2004) is contrasting the universalistic nature of modernism with the solipsistic tendencies in post-modernism where individuals might cocoon themselves within the narrow boundaries of their own immediate experience. Neither is particularly helpful in farming and both encourage monologic masculinity. Monologic traits can be solidified if farmers become so focused upon the voice of industrial agriculture as to

lose confidence in the conversation and experiences of others or even to the extent that they retreat totally into their own “pure local knowledge” (Bell, 2004: 17) at the expense of acquiring new knowledge or even considering the views of family and friends. This route leads to a position where there is nothing to say therefore nothing to learn and no way forward. On the other hand the transformative potential of dialogue, in the ways it engages others rather than dissolving into a struggle for power and dominion of one person or one group of people over another (Bell 2003), offers a theory of power that opens up spaces where farmers can resist the hegemonic institutional discourse of industrial agriculture and cultivate more sustainable ways of farming, new institutions, new identities, new political voices and greater democracy.

Rural Masculinities and Today’s Farmers

In spite of modernising trends in agriculture and accompanying changes in gender relations, rural masculinities are still in many ways constructed around traditional values and according to ascribed sex-roles that perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. This has been documented in studies of farming masculinity carried out in America (Peter et al. 2000) Ireland (Ni Laoire 2002) and France (Saugeres 2002 a, b, c) for example. Here the self-image of the traditional farmer is based on paradoxical agrarian values. On the one hand there are the romantic values of a natural connection to the land, of pride and pleasure in work, and of farming as a way of life. On the other hand there are the harsh and rugged values associated with controlling nature, of toughness, hard work and self denial. In spite of the persistence of traditional masculine identities among farmers, other constructions of masculinity are appearing in response to the changing social, economic and environmental conditions in which

farming is located and enacted. Bryant's (1999) study is useful in identifying these emerging gender identity constructions.

According to Bryant (1999), the detraditionalised farmer takes pride in utilising values of progress, professionalism and a certain amount of risk taking in the business of farming. This represents a radical departure from Bryant's (1999) definition of traditional agrarian ideology, where men take pride in physical work, women take pride in helping and nurturing and farming is understood as a way of life. This ideology is clearly evident in constructions of masculinity and femininity in rural Australia from the late nineteenth century when family farming became established. Bryant (1999) also identifies a middle identity type between the essentially opposite traditional and entrepreneurial farming identities. This middle identity she has termed the "new traditional farmer" who shares values with each, by prioritising the maintenance of the family farm, yet at the same time being less rigid about ascribed gender roles.

Alongside Bryant's (1999) new traditional farmer is the "new traditional woman" where the marriage partnership is extended to a partnership of work relations. Most women enter farming through the marriage contract (Alston, 1995) and take on their husband's occupation. However new traditional women see for themselves a productive role in farming, not as an extension of housework but as a business occupation. In this way they gain prestige from their different role from farmer's wife and from self identifying and being identified as an active and equal partner in the farm business. However although new traditional women are increasingly doing what are described as male tasks, gendered body images still separate male and female

tasks and, ultimately their positions of control. For example Saugeres (2002b) found that farmers in Rignac have appropriated technological change in that boys and men are seen as having a natural and unalterable embodied taste for machinery (especially tractors) and technology from a very early age whereas girls and women (according to the men) do not. Tractors are seen as symbols of masculine power and domination over women, however Saugeres (2002b) also found that tractors can be used as a space in which women can and are contesting male power.

In her study of gendered images in Norwegian tractor advertisements, Brandth (1995) argues that the idea of the farmer as a dirty manual mechanic is giving way to a more businesslike masculinity. She associates this technological shift with a rising emphasis on business skills and a growing disconnection from nature in constructions of farming masculinities. This relates closely to Bryant's (1999) managerial and entrepreneurial farmer types. For farmers in both of these categories, progress and efficiency are highly valued. For the entrepreneur, self employment, maximising profit, risk-taking and the successes gained from taking those risks are associated with classic notions of entrepreneurialism and successful farming by finding ways to succeed regardless of market conditions.

Methods and Data Collection

Because the study sought to explore the ways in which young male farmers reflect on their masculinities and farming practices, a qualitative methodology was needed in order to gain an understanding about how these young men perceive of themselves, their lives, their work and the same characteristics in others. Twelve young male farmers, whose average age was 23 years, gave their consent to participate in the

research in two focus groups comprising five participants in each group. The groups were homogenous in that all participants came from farming backgrounds and each was working on a dairy farm either as an apprentice/wage earner or in three instances as a share farmer. None owned a farm. Two of the participants were married with children. Others were variously in relationships with partners or single.

The taped discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded by labeling of keywords which were used to categorise and classify the text into patterns which identified emergent themes and assisted with integrating material into an overall map that was coherent and meaningful. This is an established analytical method developed by Miles and Huberman (1994, cited in Sarantakos, 1998). Together with the notes from observations taken during the focus group discussions, further analysis was undertaken with the purpose of identifying competing discourses and conflicting meanings. The definition of discourse used here is similar to that defined by Fairclough, (1992) and used by Saugeres (2002a: 376) in that “it refers to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice”. Discourse was analysed by paying close attention to recurrent words and themes and how they were used in their immediate context. Direct quotes from the transcripts used here in the findings are reproduced verbatim including all nuances of language and speech as far as is possible.

The next section of the paper gives the young farmers in this study a voice. The analysis takes the reader through a trajectory of identity constructions in farming from the tough traditional farmer who acknowledges the need to adopt modern business values and who in some instances is moving toward new farming masculinities.

Analysis of the findings

The Tough Traditional Farmer

As discussed earlier, the self image of the traditional farmer is based on agrarian values of controlling nature, of toughness, hard work and self-denial, of pride and pleasure in work and farming as a way of life. This type of construction is one that is evident among the young farmers in the study area. There is a strong sense among them that farming is a physically tough job often requiring a denial of comfort, in a way that other occupations do not, and a requirement of sacrifice in order to achieve certain economic and lifestyle goals.

In identifying the lifestyle they want and the sacrifices needed to achieve it, a number of the young farmers ascribe to a traditional construction of masculinity, yet at the same time in reflecting on the traditional aspect of “sacrifice” they echo a commonly held view that farmers these days are sacrificing more for less. This theme became established and was often referred back to as the discussion developed around the pressure and uncertainty in the dairying industry and the requirement of certain qualities for those who want to farm. Others distinguish themselves as farmers in ways that set them apart from non-farmers:

“Yeah people outside of farming they don’t know much about it, like we are just dairy farmers who play around in the shit. People ask me ‘what do you do with yourself?’ and I say ‘I do an Apprenticeship milking cows’ and they say ‘What do you do an Apprenticeship just to milk cows for?’, yeah ‘You’re in the crap all the time so what

do you want to milk cows for? You could be doin' somethin' else' and like I say
“Yeah! like what, sittin' inside in an office all day?” (Jed).

“People think if you are a farmer you don't know how to do anything else, like they don't look at the technology of farming, like you gotta be pretty switched on to be a good farmer these days” (Chad).

The metaphor of 'shit' is used frequently to invoke the harsh and dirty conditions in which dairy farmers often have to work. But Chad and Jed are not just “playing around in the shit”; they identify with technology and apprenticeship training as modes to good farming. Their non-farming mates may think otherwise, but Chad and Jed identify as “switched on” farmers who are able to apply technology and education to their jobs and so be more than just ‘shit kickers’. These qualities are important to their self image and they are echoed in the sentiments expressed by a number of the young farmers.

There are still elements of the traditional farmer in the dialogue here where farming is seen as a lifestyle of physical and often dirty work. This is sometimes compared to the cleaner and less physical working conditions of relatives and mates. However there is also evidence of a shift from the traditional (physical) to the modern (technological) career farmer. Not only does a farmer have to be tough and able to work physically and put up with difficult and dirty conditions, he has to be “switched on” and “able to keep up with things” if he is to survive in the current climate of farming. On listening to Jed tell of his mates comments about the dirty and physical nature of farming, Chad, on reflection, has cast another light on what it takes to be a good farmer. This

involves keeping up with technology and information and being open to change, something which, in contrast, a number of the young farmers thought the older generation of farmers were not able or willing to do. This suggests that some of the young farmers are building their identities in two ways: firstly, by contrasting themselves with their non-farming mates who they see as not as “tough” as themselves, especially if they work indoors, but probably up with technology and secondly, with older farmers who might be “tough” but not as “switched on” to technology.

From Manual Work to Business Values

There is evidence of modern business values in the discourse in this study which contrast with the more traditional agrarian values that are also evident. Sauger (2002a) reminds us that identity is multiple. Farmers can draw on a number of different discourses in creating their biographies and will usually draw on more than one.

The traditional orientations toward farming amongst the young farmers often emphasised the qualities of a good farmer in the context of a strong work ethic, a long term commitment to farming and caring for animals and the land. The young farmers talked about working outdoors and not being able to work in an office without feeling hemmed in and “bored”. This led to them identifying the contradiction that sometimes when they are working hard outside they wish they could be indoors, particularly in rough weather, but then when they are indoors they are getting restless and wanting to be outside working.

Clearly the outdoor life is a symbol of masculinity here. It is epitomised in the “good” farmer being outside doing his work, caring for his animals and the land. In this way the “good” traditional masculine farmer is distinguished from the nurturing feminine helper, the “other”, who is less valued but who is also associated with caring for animals. However in this instance caring for animals along with the land is what the “good” farmer does and the “good” farmer is a man and so the care of animals is in this way associated with masculinity.

This construction of (traditional) masculinity is reinforced when it is compared to the indoor life and the need to attend to “the (modern) business side of things”. The young farmers who voice this traditional masculinity most are those who take pride in the work they do and those who are committed to farming for the long term even if at times this commitment does not reward them financially. There is a sense among them that resilience is an honourable quality and that if they “stick at it” in the difficult times their effort will ultimately be rewarded. There is real pride in seeing the results of one’s labour:

“I love it when the cows are milkin’ well off a crop of oats I’ve planted. You plough the ground and sow the crop and get the milk and then if you are lucky you can cut hay off it too” (Theodore).

Jed pointed out the multitudinous skills of many farmers including the “mechanic” abilities of some who are able to keep their machinery in good working order. However Brandth (1995) suggests the association of manual work with machinery is changing as machinery becomes more high-tech.

Many of the young farmers here express values of progress and efficiency in their stories of farming. They see farming necessarily as a business more so than as a way of life, emphasising the need for a more businesslike approach to farming and greater efficiency in the use of natural resources: land and water.

“I think now you have to be more switched on, think about where you are goin’ and, um, with it bein’ so dry you know, there is a fine line between makin’ money and goin’ broke, so you gotta watch ya bottom line a lot more, um, you can’t afford to be too laid back or you’ll fall behind then wind up losin’ the farm and everythin’ on it if you just get too lazy and just relax a bit too much” (Chad).

The ability to manage and fine tune their management strategies around the demands of the structural conditions of modern farming (and drought) can mean the difference between survival and loss. The loss of a farm is more than just the loss of a business enterprise; it represents the loss of a way of life and a family inheritance, and a failure to carry out one’s responsibilities. The close relationship between farm work and identity means that losing a farm can be a devastating blow to a farmer’s sense of who he is and so in this way identity is associated to a degree with economic success. For farmers who own a farm economic success is not just a function of the entrepreneurial or management skills of the individual, but is tied to the purchasing or borrowing power of the enterprise (Ni Laoire, 2004). The young farmers in this study are not yet land owners, however their jobs and their income as well as their future in farming are very much dependent upon the survival of the farms where they work and so as well as their physical skills and abilities, some of the young farmers draw on their management qualities and abilities in defining their identities.

New Farming Masculinities

The structural conditions of modern industrial farming are such that most farmers now are acting out an ongoing battle to survive and to succeed. Part of this struggle relates to retaining their identities as men. For example those farmers who confound the “success” measurement indicators of modern industrial agriculture, who are less in control of their farm through exposure to debt, those who are less productive and therefore less successful, may also be considered less masculine. One defensive response to the uncertainties in farming and the unstable structures of masculine performance is to adopt a monologic stance: a “rigid oppositional, socially controlling masculinity” (Peter et al. 2002: 231).

“Nah, keep ém in the house, I don’t want ‘em down the dairy, they ask too many questions and get in the way” (Bob).

Bob’s one liner didn’t go down very well with the group as it came in response to a suggestion that women are good with animals, however I use it here as a demonstration of a rigid monologue which dilutes the possibility of conversation. This is ironic because it is that very characteristic that Bob and others in the focus group identified and complained about in their bosses, yet at the same time applied themselves in varying degrees to the idea of women as physically hands on farmers.

Peter et al. (2000: 225) argue that the oppositional character of monologic masculinity is a poor fit with the “social and environmental interrelations and openness to change stressed by sustainable agriculture”. Yet the “structures of performance” like the

uncertainties in farming and the lack of support networks are seen to encourage monologue among male farmers. However no one is purely monologic, indeed everyone has a dialogic side, it's just that some people display a dialogic side more readily and more consistently than others.

“I think what *we* got out of this discussion or what *I* got out of this discussion is about striving to get a balance, like farming and lifestyle, and well that's my goal to get a balance of life and farming and making it sustainable and being able to make a bit of coin, but that's a huge challenge, it is a challenge you know because every day something else crops up” (Terry).

Terry begins with the dialogue of “we” and then goes to the monologue of “I” but all the time he is reflecting in dialogue with himself and expressing his thoughts to the group on the tensions within farming and the “huge challenge” of addressing them. In defining a future path for himself Terry has previously acknowledged the structural constraints of farming (see introduction) that make the challenge huge. Are these the social conditions that might encourage a greater development of dialogic masculinity? Or are they the social conditions that restrain it? Terry is here demonstrating a self reflexivity in recognising the structural constraints of farming, and in understanding what is needed to make farming as a business, and as a lifestyle, sustainable. Terry is a practical farmer and as Peter et al. (2000) point out, practical farmers need a practical identity, one with more flexible boundaries, and one that “opens up agricultural space for other voices and other ways of farming.”

There is still a strong element of rising to the challenges of farming through toughness and control. In other words some of the core features of hegemonic masculinities remain, albeit adapted to modern technologies and realities. The young farmers in this study associate modern farming with elements of a modern lifestyle such as regular holidays, days off and partners who work off the farm. However these elements of modern farming are not enough to conclude that young farmers are necessarily adopting a “dialogic” form of masculinity.

Nevertheless there is evidence of a gentler narrative among the young farmers here, particularly those who see farming in the context of the longer term. Chad feels strongly as others do that farmers need to take more care with the land and the environment:

“You have to look at what you are doin’ with your land, like if you are overstocking and um, pouring fertilisers on that are going down the drain and causing blue green algae and all that kinda stuff. Yeah it might make you money now but you know if you want to stay farming in 40 or 50 years is there gonna be any land that you can farm at the end of it? I think organic farming is good for the soils and stuff” (Chad).

There is also an awareness of changes in community expectations about food safety.

“Women care a lot more, like, you go to the sister’s joint in the city you know and they always want to know what’s in consumer products, like how much fat’s in it. They care about what’s goin’ into their food a lot more and what’s goin’ on around ‘em” (Chad).

Not only are some of the young farmers aware of the ways that women are thinking about food and the environment and the community, they are also very conscious of the dialogue that women engage in:

“Yeah women don’t seem to get the stress like the blokes you know; they talk to each other a lot more and seem to get things out in the open more” (Robert).

Along with the caring values towards the environment in this discourse is an emotional openness that does not fit with the “tough men farm” image:

“Being a dairy farmer you are very isolated you know and you can go off your head pretty easily if you don’t get out and talk to other people not just about farming but to have a social life, it’s a must for the mental health of the farmer ” (Troy).

There is also a willingness to share, to talk about their successes and their failures.

“Talkin’ with other farmers and networkin’ can be good, talkin’ about things that help each other and things that haven’t worked for other farmers; it just opens up so many doors and so many avenues” (Terry).

Dialogue enables these farmers to help one another through expressing a greater social openness. They feel liberated by admitting they make mistakes and finding out that others do too. In this way they let go of the need to control unlike the more monologic farmers who need to control and to imply that they do. Through sharing ideas and lending emotional support, dialogic masculinities build a sense of

community and belonging that are necessary in helping to ease the physical and psychological burdens that farmers suffer, particularly in times of economic crisis.

Farming is also seen as less physically tough and therefore more open to women, refuting two pervasive myths of farming.

“But there is technology bringing changes and it’s getting easier lighter work and so more women are coming into it” (Kane).

Other elements of this type of alternative masculine identities are evident among the young farmers too, such as a willingness to consider and adopt the best of both sides of farming.

“If you could incorporate organic farming on your farm it might be a way of getting the balance right and using resources better, like bits and pieces of organic and bits and pieces of conventional and they meet in the middle, you’re bound to strike it right somewhere” (Jed).

The theme of “getting a balance” dominated the ending part of the discussions reflecting the tensions at play in farming. Young farmers are aware of these tensions and of some of the alternatives available in addressing them. In other words they are questioning and recreating tradition suggesting a degree of reflexivity. However any response to that reflexivity hangs on the structural constraints of farming, the production and the labour treadmills, as well as the expectations placed upon farmers by family farm traditions. It is how the demands of those constraints are interpreted

and responded to through tradition; so that tradition might be reconstructed through that interpretation and response (Gray, 1996) that will significantly determine the future directions many farmers take. One way of reconstructing tradition according to Peter et al. (2000) is through the balance of dialogue.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to further understand the relationship between masculinities and farming practices, the role of reflexivity in the ways young farmers construct their personal stories and their masculinities, and most importantly, how those masculinities are reconstructed in light of the changing circumstances of farming and gender relations. In that their stories are the media through which the young farmers express and indicate their masculinities, it is possible to identify the discourses they draw upon and the ideologies they lean toward in putting those stories together. It is also possible to learn something of the ways in which the young farmers reflect upon the past and present conditions of farming in order to understand themselves and their farming futures, as well as the limitations they experience in those reflections or at least the ability to act as a consequence of them.

This study traces the monologic and dialogic conceptions of masculine identity construction within the same individuals. This empirical distinction makes it possible to identify how these young men's lives might unfold in a number of different ways. Given their young age it is likely that their position in terms of the social conditions of dialogue is a more ambiguous one suggesting an element of uncertainty of their place in the social structure of farming and their future as farming men. On the other hand

given the level of their reflexivity which is demonstrated in their confrontation and understandings of current structural and social conditions in farming it is also possible for dialogic engagement to develop thus enabling greater diversity in identity construction and ways of farming and living.

The values expressed in the new farming masculinities narratives interrelate in various ways with the characteristics of conventional rural masculinities. These alternative discourses find common ground with elements of the traditional physical outdoor image of farming and they draw on traditional agrarian ideology. Ni Laoire (2002) suggests that perhaps alternative dialogic forms of masculinity can develop from the fundamental values of traditional agrarian ideology: love of the land and outdoors, care for the environment and viable family farming. Such developments can be negotiated through the requirements of the processes of contemporary rural restructuring, whereby diversification is encouraged and farming is being re-defined to incorporate a role for the farmer as carer of the environment. Economic and social changes have made it possible and very often necessary for women to work off the farm in order to supplement farm incomes. This has meant the renegotiating of traditional gender divisions of labour. Therefore in this context, hegemonic farming masculinities are challenged and one response is to draw on the qualities of alternative masculine constructions and less rigid gender distinctions.

Peter et al. (2000) have used the terms monologic and dialogic masculinity in their study of the transition to sustainable agriculture in Iowa. It is a useful model with which to interrogate hegemonic rural masculinities because of the association of monologue with hegemonic conventional masculinities and the association of

dialogue with emerging alternative masculinities. Perhaps detraditionalisation involves a shift toward more dialogic constructions of masculine identities. Bryant (1999) suggests that less traditional farmer identities are associated with other less traditional values, such as less rigid gender expectations and a less constricted lifestyle.

It seems in this study that any detectable shift toward dialogic masculinities emerges from the contradictions of industrial agriculture related to a continuing compression in terms of trade and worsening environmental degradation which the drought and shortages of irrigation water brought into sharper focus. Peter et al. (2000) argue that such uncertainties in agriculture, coupled with a lack of structural support networks, encourages monologic masculine constructions amongst farmers. There was evidence of this here. What is also revealed, particularly toward the end of the focus group discussions when it came time to sum up those aspects of the discussions considered most important, is a common view of wanting to get a balance in farming, in lifestyle and in economics, in other words to achieve a greater level of sustainability. The young farmers are aware of the structural conditions of farming and how they are constrained by those structures, nevertheless for several of them striving to get their farming lives into better balance is a recognised goal.

One way to achieve a greater level of sustainability, according to a constant narrative in the present study, is to be switched on to things, to talk things over, to share concerns, to help one another and to take greater care of the environment. What emerges from this is evidence that whilst the uncertainties in farming and the lack of structural support networks encourage monologic masculinities as Peter et al. (2000)

found, and as has been found here, it is also possible that dialogic masculinities might emerge from the same social conditions. However if dialogic masculinities among young farmers are to emerge then other social conditions not yet apparent also become necessary if the seeds of dialogue among farmers are to be nurtured and encouraged to develop. Those social conditions involve the development and emergence of new support structures that farmers with a more dialogic conception of their masculinities can support and be supported by just as the practical farmers of Iowa in the study by Peter et al. (2000) have achieved. In Iowa, the farmers of “dialogic agricultural masculinity” (p.211) are working in league with its organisational structures to create a new social and political voice. Might this be a beginning to changing the voice of industrial agriculture - the institutional discourse in which Beck (1992) suggests that self determining reflexivity is embedded, a discourse in which reflexivity is itself a part – possibly through developing new technology and extension programs or accessing existing ones in order to instigate change?

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