Abstract: In the past decade a growing body of work situated at the intersection of masculinity and agriculture has emerged in the literature of rural sociology and human geography. A number of these studies have examined masculinity through discursive analytical frameworks which focus on the symbolic, cultural and embodied representations of what it is to be masculine in agriculture. It is with the latter that this paper is concerned. Here gender is located in a social constructionist framework and understood as something that is produced as a set of cultural practices which constitute men's and women's bodies in different ways. Two focus group discussions were conducted with ten young male dairy farmers in northern Victoria. A comparative analysis of the data suggests that perceptions from the masculine perspective of the non-farm work of women could be changing away from a traditional emphasis of a supportive and administrative role toward one where women's roles are acknowledged more as managerial in terms of the financial management of dairy farms. What also emerges from the young farmers' discourses is a degree of doubt and uncertainty about themselves and their own identities as managers. It would appear that they are far more confident in their roles as hands on farmers doing the outdoor physical work.
Young farmers, masculinities and the embodiment of farming practices in an Australian setting.

Ian Coldwell

Abstract

In the past decade a growing body of work situated at the intersection of masculinity and agriculture has emerged in the literature of rural sociology and human geography. A number of these studies have examined masculinity through discursive analytical frameworks which focus on the symbolic, cultural and embodied representations of what it is to be masculine in agriculture. It is with the latter that this paper is concerned. Here gender is located in a social constructionist framework and understood as something that is produced as a set of cultural practices which constitute men’s and women’s bodies in different ways. Two focus group discussions were conducted with ten young male dairy farmers in northern Victoria. A comparative analysis of the data suggests that perceptions from the masculine perspective of the non-farm work of women could be changing away from a traditional emphasis of a supportive and administrative role toward one where women’s roles are acknowledged more as managerial in terms of the financial management of dairy farms. What also emerges from the young farmers’ discourses is a degree of doubt and uncertainty about themselves and their own identities as managers. It would appear that they are far more confident in their roles as hands on farmers doing the outdoor physical work.

Keywords: Masculinity, femininity, farming practices, embodiment, monologic, dialogic

Introduction

In the decade since Brandth (1995) pioneered the study of masculinity in agriculture a growing body of research around this topic has emerged in the literature of rural
sociology and human geography. A number of these studies have examined masculinity through discursive analytical frameworks which focus on the symbolic, cultural and embodied representations of what it is to be masculine in agriculture (Brandth, 1995; Liepins, 2000; Ni Laoire, 2002; Peter, Bell, Jarnagin & Bauer, 2000; Saugeres, 2002b). It is with the latter, embodied representations of what it is to be masculine in agriculture in an Australian setting that this paper is concerned.

Most of the field work on this topic is grounded in the social construction of gender developed most notably by Connell (1995). Here masculinity is understood as a configuration of social practice in relation to femininity, constructed through discourse and enacted through the body. These processes produce hierarchies of masculinity and in most social settings a dominant or hegemonic masculinity which reveals to men the attributes they need in order to be acceptably male.

For young men generally changes in employment and normative gender relations mean that they have to negotiate new and more flexible masculine identities. For farming men these processes are associated with the ways in which farming and rural life has been vastly altered through the rationalising processes taking place in agriculture at the behest of neo liberal policies, bourgeoning technological advancement and globalisation (Gray & Lawrence, 2001).

Being male centered, this study does not imply uncritical acceptance of the participants accounts of themselves and their experiences. Rather this approach builds on the notion of masculinities as achieved as a set of practices Connell (1995, 2000)
performative acts (Butler, 1990) or ways of ‘doing’ (rural) masculinity (Brandth & Haugen, 2005, p. 13) related to the social contexts in which they occur.

It is recognised that in order to more fully understand the persistence of traditional gender relations and subjectivities of men and women on the land, it is necessary to understand the ways in which men construct their identities in relation to those of women. Much of the work on masculinities in agriculture to date has been concerned with the relationship between masculinities and the natural environment where the good farmer is defined by a hegemonic masculinity which rests on an ability to manipulate and control nature (Saugeres, 2002a) in order to maximise production, strength and power. This concentration on the construction of hegemonic forms of masculinity within agriculture leaves a window for studies to more fully engage with ideas of fluidity and movement that have characterised the wider study of gender identity in sociology (Brandth, 2002).

To date little discussion has taken place around the attitudes of male farmers toward women in farming. With the exception of Ni Laoire’s (2002, 2004, 2005) work in Ireland, studies on young men in agriculture is an area that to date has been largely neglected. This raises the following question. Are women accepted when they possess and perform masculine qualities of physical strength or are they valued for different abilities which are outside of those drawn on in the construction of traditional masculine identities in agriculture?

Building on earlier field work carried out in France (Saugeres, 2002a, b, c); America (Peter et al., 2000; Bartlett & Conger, 2004) and Ireland (Ni Laoire, 2002) this paper
will discuss the findings of part of a small exploratory study of young male dairy farmers in one locality in northern Victoria in relation to the findings of those earlier studies.

**Most farmers they say are Men**

The perception that most farmers are men and that farming equates to the work that they do, is a persistent theme in the rural sociological literature of gender and farming. Recent research has questioned this perception. The notion that the physical outdoor work of the farm and the farmer is the mainstay of the farm’s income generation and welfare has been challenged. This has come about in part through a redefining of the question of what constitutes work in terms of farming (Alston, 2004). One of the ways in which this has been done has been to calculate all of the tasks which contribute to the welfare and income generation of farms. Research has revealed that farm women in Australia contribute 48% of real farm income through the work they do both on and off the farm (RIRDC and DPIE, 1998). In spite of these findings there continues to be resistance to change to traditional gender divisions of labour on farms and in farm households in spite of considerable changes to work relations and ways of living on farms and in rural communities generally (Alston, 1995, 2000).

Complimenting the extensive research around the subjective positions of women in farming is the more recent emergence in international literature of a growing inquiry into relationships at the intersection of masculinity and agriculture (Bartlett & Conger, 2004; Brandth, 1995; Bryant, 1999; Liepins, 2000; Ni Laoire, 2002, 2004, 2005; Peter et al. 2000). Emerging from this research is substantial evidence of time bound
meanings of what it is to be a farmer: heterosexual masculinity, greater physical strength than women, the use of that strength to control and manipulate the natural environment, and greater knowledge of farming practices, economics and technology than women (Bryant, 2003). Further, it is evident that as farming practices have evolved in response to changing structural conditions and technological innovation, men have appropriated the knowledge and performance of these innovations in ways that perpetuate their dominant position as head of the farming enterprise and the farm household (Brandth, 1995; Bryant, 2003; Saugeres, 2002b). The appropriation of knowledge reproduces a gendered hierarchy which subordinates women in farming. In this way the traditional gender divisions of labour and the accompanying imbalances of power in gender relations are superimposed onto farm businesses that are increasingly reliant on new knowledge and technology.

Theorising masculinity

Masculinity is not a natural occurrence. Rather masculinity is constructed in relation to femininity in social interaction and achieved through the cultural resources that are available to men and boys in a given social setting. For the men in this study these resources include ideologies, social structures and also their own social position. But it begins even before that. Davies points out that boys know in pre-school, and probably even before they can talk, that ‘the world is divided into male and female, hard and soft, powerful and weak’ (1993, p. 89). Even though they may not be able to articulate its meaning boys know from a very early age that they are located in the ‘male half of an oppositional and hierarchical dualism’. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002, p. 75) point out that there is usually a dominant form of masculinity in a social setting which guides the understanding of boys and men on how they have to act in
order to be ‘acceptably male’. This dominant form of masculinity is ‘associated with heterosexual, toughness, power and authority and the subordination of gay men’.

This dominant form of masculinity has been conceptualised by Raewyn Connell (1995) as ‘hegemonic’ masculinity. According to Connell (2001, p. 2) an example of this can be gleaned from the world of work which is often presented to boys and young men as they grow up through an ‘idealisation of the aggressive business executive whose ruthless drive and capacity to outsmart and defeat his competitors are the marks of success’ (Connell, 2001, p. 2).

Others have adopted Connell’s approach. Frosh et al. (2002, p. 77) identified an emergent hegemonic ‘popular masculinity’ in their study of boys in London schools which involves hardness, sporting prowess, ‘coolness’, casual treatment of schoolwork and being adept at ‘cussing’, dominance and control’. Similarly, Bryant (2006, p. 68) in a study of students at an Australian agricultural college identified a dominant discourse of heterosexual masculinity that is ‘raw, undiluted and unrefined’. This heterosexual masculinity was expressed in terms that categorised differences between women and men according to binary opposites understood as genetic differences and therefore derived from nature and not from culture. These differences are understood and expressed by the young men as ‘natural/biological differences associated with gendered bodies’ (p. 69) to construct their own masculinities through strength. They see themselves therefore as superior to women who they see in terms of lacking strength to carry out farm work and when they do they are described, by these young men, as ‘heifers’ and lack sex appeal.
**Embodied masculinity**

Bourdieu (1990, p. 4) argues that through socialisation into a culture people acquire a system of dispositions (habitus) which are then reproduced through everyday discourse and practice. This system of dispositions is gendered and so both men and women reproduce patriarchal ideologies which subordinate the position of women. Therefore gender differences are not just the product of material inequalities; they are institutionalised into the ‘objectivity of social structures and the subjectivity of mental structures’. Further, Bourdieu (1990, p. 7) argues that this gender division appears as though it is part of the natural order because ‘it exists in the embodied ‘habitus’ and works as a system of categories of perception, thoughts and actions’. Because the characteristics of men and women are naturalised according to their respective biologies, these differences appear to be part of an inevitable and unchangeable natural order. As Bourdieu points out, the universality of masculine domination prevents this supposed natural order from being changed. However when different ways of living are seen to be possible then choices that are seen as supposedly natural can be reconceptualised as being socially constructed and historically constituted. Then as people go on in a system of dispositions they acquire through experience, they can make choices from a wider range of situations less bound by rules. Therefore men and women not only reinforce and reproduce unequal gender relations which are structured by the ‘habitus’ but are able to contest and alter these practices (Bourdieu, 1990).

In this system, constructions of the feminine are devalued in opposition to constructions of the masculine. This applies not only to gender difference but to any perceived differences to Western patriarchal ‘norms’ of masculinity and so this
dualism not only structures the ways in which men and women act, but also the ways in which they think and talk (Bourdieu 1990; Plumwood 1993; Saugeres 2002b). As Saugeres (2002b, p. 145) points out, the dominant view in this dualism centres on the masculine self as universal defined against an inferiorised ‘other’. Because woman is seen as ‘other’ to the masculine self, and as belonging to an inferior order, women are in this way ‘marginalised and excluded from the culturally defined realm of masculine activities’ (Saugeres, 2002b, p. 145). Characteristics and activities considered to be masculine are highly valued as long as it is men who have these characteristics and do these activities (Bourdieu 1990; Saugeres 2002b).

In her 1995 work and since, Connell has developed a more fully integrative theory of masculinities. This work recognises more recent analyses of the physical body in social theory. Hence Connell (1995) argues that individuals construct (and are constructed by) gender both through differentially empowered relationships with others and through ‘body-reflexive practices’ (pp. 26, 27) in which the body’s physical attributes and activities become an agent in the gendering of the human subject.

Saugeres (2002c) has pointed out the usefulness of gender in this type of analysis if it is conceptualised as being very much embodied. It is then possible to transcend the distinction between sex and gender if we consider gender as encompassing both bodily and ideological practice within a particular social and cultural context. As such, ‘gender is not simply the product of culturally constructed ideas inscribed on a neutral passive body but the product of cultural practices which constitute men’s and women’s bodies in different ways. These different embodied ways both reflect and
reproduce hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity. Not only are
gender differences reproduced through their embodiment in social practice, they are
also reproduced and naturalised through discourse and representations of sexual
difference’ as Saugeres (2002c: 643) found in this study.

**Studying masculinity in agriculture**

### Changing constructions of masculinity and femininity

In terms of understanding patterns of both constant and changing constructions of
masculine and feminine identities in farming Brandth’s (2002) literature review of
gender identity in European family farming provides very useful insights. Drawing on
Foucault’s (1980) concept of discourses and their relationship to identity and power,
Brandth articulates discourse as constituting the minds, bodies and identities of
individuals within wider networks of power relations and therefore as sites for the
regulation of individuals and relations between individuals. Brandth (2002) identified
three pervasive discourses in agriculture: (1) the discourse of the family farm; (2) the
discourse of masculinisation and (3) the discourse of detraditionalisation and
diversity. These discourses illuminate patterns of stability and change over time in the
subjective positions of men and women in farming.

Drawing on two of these discourses, the first and the third, Alston (2006, p. 158)
points out that the discourse of family farming is the dominant discourse in Australian
agriculture: it accepts ‘a subordinate, prescribed and essentialist position for women’.
It follows that the persistence of this dominant discourse in Australian agriculture
perpetuates an uncritical acceptance of traditional roles for women and little acknowledgement of the significance and worth of their efforts and contribution to family farming and its survival (Alston, 2006). On the other hand Brandth’s (2002, p. 192) discourse of detraditionalisation and diversity illuminates the multiplicity and diversity of women’s subjectivities in agriculture. Here women are seen as ‘capable, influential and independent agents’. This discursive approach enables social diversity and a multiplicity of subjective positions which become evident through a focus upon the ‘processes by which farm women are (re)negotiated through everyday practices with explicit attention being paid to identity construction (Brandth, 2002, p. 195).

In the case of men it is worth noting that in the discourse of the family farm neither women nor men can easily escape from the positions offered them in this discourse (Brandth, 2003. p. 196). Further, in the second discourse, the discourse of masculinisation, it is the subjective positions of farm men that appear in the literature which focuses on the technological, structural and cultural changes in agricultural production. Initially these studies documented how through mechanisation, farming became a fully masculine space. This transition took away women’s outdoor tasks in the production process and strengthened the identities of men as farmers. More recently the focus of studies shifted to reveal different positions for men and women in farming. The masculinsation of farming and rural communities has not necessarily been positive for men in all respects. This process has been accompanied by women moving into off farm employment and in many cases leaving rural areas altogether. Many rural women now are better educated, multi skilled and more independent. Men are often left to run farms alone and so are isolated and often interpreted as ‘non-modern, backward, and under-privileged’ compared to women who are seen to be
independently active in ‘constructing their late modern identity’ (Brandth, 2002, p. 196).

The discourse of detraditionalisation and diversity is a theme taken up by Bryant (1999). According to Bryant 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. On the other hand 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. Alston (1995) found in many cases that the success of the farm
business is reliant on women’s organisational and administrative skills. However she also found as Bryant (1999) does that women’s non-manual farm work is seen to be in a supportive role rather than a managerial role. 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’ (Bryant, 1999, p. 245).

**Alternative concepts of masculinity**

Peter et al. (2000) also found that ‘dirt and self-denial’ and the tractor are embedded symbols of masculine identity in terms of power and the control and mastery of the natural environment among Iowa farmers. However their study also allows other possibilities for gender and farm practice performances in new and interesting ways. The point of departure in this study lies in a conceptual distinction in the analysis of the data. Working from a constructionist model the authors distil their data through two heuristic concepts: monologic and dialogic masculinity: the former derives power from a denial of any relational characteristics in terms of masculinity being produced and reproduced in relation to femininity (Campbell, Bell & Finney 2006). Monologic masculinity is a traditional masculinity with rigid expectations and strictly negotiated performances that provide a clear distinction between men’s and women’s work. Therefore it is closed in conception and style. Dialogic masculinity on the other hand embraces its relational origins and demonstrates a more open and engaging approach. It seeks to take others into account and remains open to the needs, concerns and opinions of others. In its language and categories, dialogic masculinity is not rigid and fixed, rather it reflects an outlook of our place in the social world of one that is
interactive and constantly changing. In their findings Peter et al. (2000) argue 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. They suggest that the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) who are moving away from industrial farming practices toward more sustainable ways of farming tend to adopt and practice a more open and dialogic masculinity. This has significant implications for the future of farming practices and gender relations on the farm.

Liepins (2000) contrasts ‘conventional’ narratives of farming with ‘alternative’ narratives. She finds conventional narratives to be dominant and defined by such characteristics as rigid gender roles and an association of farming with masculinity and toughness. These dominant narratives are being challenged by alternative (subordinate) narratives including constructions of the woman farmer and the ‘sensitive new-age farmer’. The ‘sensitive new-age farmer’ construction depicts masculinity that is associated with mental or organisational skills and with sustainable/organic agriculture and child care. This could be interpreted as a more dialogic form of masculinity like that found among alternative agriculture farmers in a study by Peter et al. (2000) and is an illustration of how farming masculinities can move away from the conventional hegemony. Liepins’ (2000) alternative narrative of the ‘sensitive new-age farmer’ is close to the ‘new traditional’ farmer in Bryant’s (1999) typology. Both of these categories give emphasis to the value of family farming, less prescriptive gender roles and openness to alternative farming practices.
In the above discussion of the empirical literature the discourse of detraditionalisation and diversity suggest that the subject positions of men and women in agriculture can change in line with wider social changes and move away from the conventional hegemony of masculine domination. However what is also evident is that the conventional hegemonic discourse of the family farm which ascribes the status of farmer to men continues to assert itself over other subordinate discourses. However what the literature also reveals is that scant discussion has taken place around the attitudes of male farmers toward women in farming. Are they accepted when they possess and perform masculine qualities of physical strength or are they valued for different skills which are outside of traditional masculine identities in agriculture? Previous work on gender roles in agriculture by Alston (1995) and others has considered those aspects of ‘women’s work’ that are valued or undervalued in relation to their contribution to the production process. How such roles relate to attitudes toward femininity of both men and women in farming would be an enlightening contribution to this question.

Methods and study background

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. The study was carried out in one locality in northern Victoria, Australia. Ten 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. Four were working on family of origin farms. None owned a farm. Two of the participants were married with children. Others were variously in relationships with partners or single.

The participants are typical of young farmers within the dairying industry and also young farmers generally. However they are distinctive in that they fall into a demographic that were born and grew up in the era that Brandth (2003) has identified as producing the discourse of detraditionalisation and diversity: the age of rapid technological innovation and when many women moved to off farm employment. This is a time when the traditional social arrangements identified in the discourse of the family farm began to alter toward alternative arrangements. Therefore in these terms, the young men in this study are not typical of Australian dairy farmers or of other farmers generally.

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 Using this map together with the notes taken from observations 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, p. 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.

Findings and analysis

The gendered nature of farm work

Alston (1995), Bryant (1999), and Shortall (1992) among others have argued that the construction of farming as a business is highly gendered. Dominant discourses position men as farmers and farming as the work they do. Those same discourses position women in subordinate roles of farmer’s wife and helper. The work that women do off the farm is seen as complimentary to that of the farmer whereas the work they on the farm is seen either as their domestic role or as non farm work such as administration or book keeping. Here I want to test these assumptions with a group of young male farmers, a cohort that is very under researched in terms of the relationships between gender and farming practices. The direct quotes used here are representative of those which emerged from the two focus group discussions.

‘Why do we generally think of men as farmers and not women?’ (Ian)

‘It was just tradition, men out and worked and women stayed home and done the housework, and also kids are reared accordin’ to stereotypes’ (Jed)
Most of the young farmers showed an awareness of the traditional roles of farmers and their wives, however they generally related this duality, as shown in Jed’s description, to their grand-parents’ generation. When it came to their parents’ generation they spoke in terms of a shift in gender roles that occurred as they were growing up. It became the norm for farm women to work off the farm. As pluriactivity became necessary for farm survival as the cost price squeeze began to take effect in the 1970s. Many of the young farmers talked about how their mothers had worked off the farm in professions such as teaching, nursing, hairdressing and in offices, and how ‘those were the jobs’ women did in those days. Terry pointed out the family farm may not have survived ‘if mum hadn’t brought in a second income’. In addition to this, many of their mothers are seen as the ones who, as well as looking after things in the house, keep their finger on the pulse and do the books and know what is going on with the business ‘even if they don’t milk cows’. Here the roles of women working off the farm and doing ‘non-farm’ work on the farm are seen as supportive to the farmer who is either outside working and milking his cows or else doing ‘non–farm’ work managing the farm. However there is another discourse emerging:

‘Is the tradition still happening?’ (Ian)

‘I think it’s startin’ to change, have a look at that girl who won that apprenticeship award the other week’ (Chad)
‘Yeah she was on the cover of the ‘Country News’\(^1\), it just goes to show women are steppin’ it up a bit, it shows they are comin’ through and want to be heard and don’t want to be just women anymore, they don’t want to just stay home and cook and clean and look after the kids, they want to farm and earn some money themselves.’ (Jed)

What do you mean when you say they ‘don’t want to be just women anymore’? (Ian)

Jed shrugs and then says:

‘They want to be real farmers, you know, hands on the same as us, just goes to show the tradition is changin’ (Jed)

For Jed the ‘real’ farmer is ‘us’ the men, the ones who are ‘hands on’ working out on the farm doing manual work against those who are not. They are ‘just women’ taking care of the kids and the house and maybe feeding the calves. Traditional gender roles in farming legitimise men as true farmers and value the work they do whereas women are cast in helping and nurturing roles that are not as valued or recognised, they are ‘just women’. For some of the young men these roles serve to maintain the femininity of women at the same time as they maintain the masculinity of the young men in light of uncertainty and self doubt. To do farm work you have to be masculine and have masculine characteristics which are highly valued. If women do farm work they are thought to be taking on masculine characteristics in one sense and in another to be giving feminine characteristics to farm work, and so are seen by some men to be devaluing the highly valued traditional domain of masculinity.

\(^1\) The Country News is a weekly rural publication distributed in Northern Victoria by Mc Pherson Media, Shepparton.
There is almost a tentative feel to this discourse that suggests a perception of change to the traditional gender roles in farming. The young men talk as though they are navigating in unfamiliar territory. However what is revealed is that women are seen to be entering farming and contesting the established gender order by wanting to be farmers in their own right and not just through a marriage contract. Women are seen as wanting to be ‘hands on’ and ‘wanting to be heard’ and wanting to ‘earn a living’ from farming. Two of the classmates of focus group one are young women farmers².

‘You got Chelsea and Cindy in there (fellow students in the next room); they are all enthusiastic about farmin’ and want to be hands on all the time’
(Chad)

On the other hand the experience with members of focus group two who studied agriculture at colleges with female classmates reported that the young women pursuing tertiary qualifications were more interested in agricultural careers as consultants and agronomists than in hands on farming. At the same time there was an awareness of several independent women farmers in the district who had succeeded in the business of stud cattle breeding and showing. These experiences coupled with the experiences of watching their mother’s involvement with the financial planning and management of the family farm revealed a sense among them that women are ‘awesome’ at a number of aspects of farming especially those relating to the nurturing of young animals and the breeding and showing of livestock but more particularly with the detail and ‘management’ of finances.

² The young women farmers were not part of the focus group discussion.
‘The females are better managers because they have to know every last detail and so they suss things out more’ (Jack)

One of the characteristics of Bryant’s, 1999 entrepreneurial farmer is an element of risk taking associated with financial management and directed toward making money regardless of market conditions. Saugere’s (2002c, p. 149) French study gives an example of where boys were seen to be ‘biologically reckless and careless’, whereas ‘girls are delicate, refined and careful’.

‘I don’t think women take risks like men, women are pretty thorough and they’ve got it all worked out in their head before they start’ (Theodore).

Women are seen to be less likely to take risks, more likely to delve into options and to acquire knowledge about those areas of the farm business that require expenditure. In this way they are seen to be more cautious and conservative than male farmers who are seen to take more risks and be less likely to weigh up all the options.

‘I guess the female farmers I have had anything to do with have always been a bit more conservative than male farmers, um, cautious, probably they learn a bit more from research whereas a bloke will usually take notice of what the neighbour down the road says’ (Troy).
‘Yeah but there is another point about all of this ya know. My old girl is a teacher and so she probably has a few more clues than the old man anyhow’ (Terry).

‘Yeah that’s it the women are better educated than they used to be’ (Robert).

The young farmers are aware of the changes that have occurred in the social relations of farming over the past three decades, they grew up with them. A number of their mothers are professionals who work off the farm either part time or full time in teaching, nursing, real estate and law for example. These professions signify distinct differences in the experiences of what women on many farms do nowadays compared to those of earlier generations where women were more likely to remain at home on the farm carrying out their duties as housewives and helpers defined by traditional gender roles of indoor and outdoor work.

In spite of the preliminary nature of this research and its restriction to a small group in one locality and from one farming pursuit, there is evidence in the discourse here to suggest that in some instances perceptions of the non-farm work of women from the masculine perspective could be changing away from an emphasis of a supportive and administrative role toward one where women’s roles are acknowledged more as managerial in terms of the financial management of dairy farms: the management of BAS returns to the Australian Tax Office, forward budgeting, ordering inputs, marketing of livestock, dealing with accountants and bank managers. As a consequence however, what also emerges from the young farmers’ discourses is a degree of doubt and uncertainty about themselves and their own identities as
managers. They are far more confident in their roles as hands on farmers doing the outdoor physical work. This is reflected in an analysis of the discourse relating to the physical hands on side of farming which arose in further discussion on the ways that women might farm:

‘How do you think women might farm?’ (Ian)

‘I don’t think it would make any difference, male or female, I think if you are a farmer you are a farmer – I think a female would farm similar to a male except she might have to implement different things for different jobs, like she might have to employ someone to do certain things because she is not able to do them’ (Troy)

‘Like what?’ (Ian)

‘Like liftin’ 50 kilo bags of DAP’ (Troy)

Because men are supposed to be physically stronger than women, they are seen to be able to do farm work which women are unable to do because they lack the physical strength. Therefore some farming tasks in this study are represented as being masculine:

‘There are some things a woman can’t do like buildin’ a shed or cartin’ concrete and I mean just go out there and see if a woman can pull a calf’ (Peter)
Other farming tasks are seen to be feminine:

‘Women are very good at lookin’ after things like calves and plantin’ trees and they love stud cattle and attention to detail. They are more particular about the environment side of it too, like they won’t even burn silage wrap’
(Peter)

Women who are seen to have the physical strength to farm by themselves and perform the tasks usually thought to be masculine, are seen in some ways as unnatural and their attempts to be hands on farmers are often understood as such through their physical attributes:

‘There are some pretty big women’ (Bob)

‘If she is a female farmer she is probably going to be a bit butch (masculine) anyway and is going to be able to lump those bags’ (Troy)

The perception that women who do physical hands on farm work are more masculine in appearance and therefore less attractive to men is sometimes extended to their sexuality. This is evident in the following remark about a local farm woman who had recently left her husband to begin a new life in a same sex relationship:

‘Yeah (woman farmer’s name) down at the mile corner she was real butch for sure, got married and then she jumped the fence and got in with the heifers’
(Robert).
Like Saugeres (2002c) study, the young farmers here, through their discursive representations of men’s and women’s bodies in farming, maintain and legitimate farm women in a subordinate position to farmers. Women are seen as not being able to farm in a complete way because they lack the physical attributes that are defined as essential to being a farmer. If they do have some of the physical attributes and/or are able to farm independently they are said to have masculine ‘butch’ attributes and so are physically unattractive to men. However as Saugeres (2002c) points out these women are still not able to farm like men. Women need to have a man on the farm in order to be able to get all the work done just as they, the ‘other’, need to be complemented by men in order to be complete women. Women who farm independently and/or are partnered by other women are seen to be like men because their biology makes them look and act more like men. However they neither are whole men nor are they whole women because they do not have a man to complete the construction of the whole woman. Therefore the bodies of these women are even more marginalised and desexed through their exclusion from both masculine and feminine norms of identity construction.

The discourse emerging in this discussion supports the traditional and hegemonic discourse of the family farm in which physical hands-on farming is a masculine occupation. However this view stands in contrast to the discourse adopted by the young farmers in discussing the gendered construction of farming as a business which suggests an emerging acknowledgment of the managerial nature of women’s ‘non-farm’ work.

**Discussion and conclusion**
The purpose of this paper has been to further understand relationships between masculinities and farming practices in terms of the ways in which young male dairy farmers understand the embodiment of their own gender identities and farming practices in relation to those of women in agriculture and, how those identities 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.

Comparison of the findings of this study with those reported in the literature support a number of the findings of earlier studies and highlight consistent discourses drawn upon in the construction of masculine identities. There is also evidence of an emerging discourse challenging the literature on earlier findings characterising farm women’s non-farm work as administrative rather than managerial.

A consciousness about gender in constructing their identities is evident among the young farmers. The young farmers who identify as modern construct and reconstruct their identities in relation to the identities of women who are entering farming on the same terms as themselves i.e. as young apprentices. For example they see women’s ‘non-farm’ work as managerial rather than administrative and women’s abilities in those areas greater rather than subordinate to their own capabilities. However this is confounded by the defence of the masculine domain of outdoor farm work in the ways the young farmers construct their own farming identities and those of women around conservative ideologies of embodied farming practices.
The young farmers in this study maintain a traditional response in relating their views on how the heavy outdoor work of farming should be carried out and by whom. Here the physical realities of the farm remain in the domain of men as a masculine space for the masculine body almost as if physical farm work is the last bastion of masculinity in farming. Women are allowed to do certain ‘nurturing’ things which endorse their feminine role but once they attempt the real hands-on work of farming they pose a threat to masculinity, to its space and its power which becomes evident in male responses to these farm women’s social and physical attributes: their appearance, their mannerisms, their lack of a man and sometimes even their sexuality. The entrepreneurial and managerial discourses of farming display constructions of masculinity associated with rational business values and the use of advanced technology in machinery, irrigating systems and high-tech dairies for example, all suggesting elements of control over nature. Literature suggests that these discourses are also highly gendered, distinguishing masculine work such as management from feminine work. In other words, they involve largely monologic forms of masculinity. In this study the discourse on the gendered nature of the managerial aspects of the business of dairy farming take on more egalitarian values as the young farmers give almost unequivocal support to the notion that women are good at management and the attention to detail it requires. Women are accorded a managerial status.

This is a reflection of the life experiences of the young men in this study who grew up in the era which produced the discourse of detraditionalisation: when traditional gendered social arrangements identified in the discourse of the family farm began to alter toward alternative arrangements. The mothers of these young men in most cases worked in professions off the farm. At the same time they also took very active roles
in the financial management of dairy farms. On the other hand the fathers of the young men, in the main, carried out the physical outdoor work: irrigating, milking cows and driving tractors. Being socialised in this way seems to have impacted on the development of the ‘habitus’ of the young men. They have grown up with a different set of social norms than earlier generations of dairy farmers. Seeing their mothers actively engaged in the financial management of the business of dairy farming has shaped their notions of the value of women’s roles in farming. This demonstrates how practical changes in everyday lives can challenge the discursive structures in which gender identities and farming practices are produced and reproduced. Such changes can, over time, lead to wider and longer lasting social change.

Earlier studies such as Bryant (1999) and Alston (1995) where the status of women was seen to be administrative and therefore as a supportive role rather than a more participatory one, and recognised as such, did not engage with young farmers from this age cohort or from the dairy industry and so it is difficult to draw comparisons across age groups and across farming systems. Therefore the findings of this study are restricted to young male dairy farmers and must therefore be said to be somewhat tentative though well worthy of noting.

Acknowledgements:

The author is grateful to the young farmers who participated in this study. This paper has benefited from the comments of Ian Gray, Marion Bannister and two anonymous referees.
References


Ni Laoire, (2002). Young farmers, masculinities and change in rural Ireland. *Irish Geography, 35*(1), 16-27


RIRDC & DPIE see Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and Department of Primary Industries and Energy.

Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and Department of Primary Industries and Energy (1998). Missed opportunities: Harnessing the potential of women in Australian agriculture, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.


**Ian Coldwell** is Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University. His academic and research interests include: sustainable farming, masculinity, environmental sociology, rural communities, social inequality and Federalism. Ian’s current major research project is based on the relationship between masculine identities and farming practices: the topic of this paper.