Subjective realities of older male farmers: Self-perceptions of ageing and work

by Judith Gullifer & Anthony P. Thompson

Abstract

The research focused on the experiences and identity of aged male farmers in relation to farming and ageing using a phenomenological design. A sample of eight Australian farmers ranging in age from 65 to 80 years participated in audio taped interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four prominent themes, 1) the narrative of 'toughness', 2) a down-to-earth view of ageing, 3) attachment to place and 4) the importance of feeling productive and useful. The themes are potently portrayed in selected comments from the interviewees and linked to relevant issues in the ageing literature. They reveal the complex nature of ageing, in a world where masculinity and agrarian values have been socially constructed and identity is regulated accordingly. It is suggested that underlying the manifest themes was the psychological dynamic of nourishing the identity to maintain a positive self-concept. Findings imply that for many aged male farmers, their lifestyle has engendered particular perspectives that are integral to their adaptations to ageing.

Keywords: Ageing, farmers, life changes

Introduction

Trees grow stronger over the years, rivers wider. Likewise, with age, human beings gain immeasurable depth and breadth of experience and wisdom. That is why older persons should be not only respected and revered; they should be utilized as the rich resource to society that they are.

United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan (2002)

Like the rest of the western world, Australia is experiencing a rapid increase in the proportion and absolute numbers of older people. This 'greying' of Australia is now a well-recognised demographic trend and is increasingly evident among our population of farmers. In 2001 the average age of Australian farmers was 58 years compared to 54 years in 1974 (Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics, 2003). Farmers routinely work beyond the standard retirement age and farm, often at a reduced scale, to an advanced age. At a time of physical decline, older farmers may face increased vulnerability to injuries and illness and may perform tasks beyond their ability to safely accomplish. Adding to this problem is a growing reluctance for family members to continue working the land, obliging the older farmer to continue alone.

Traditionally, patrilineal inheritance practices have determined and reinforced the perceptions of farming as a male
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dominated industry, with fathers relying on their sons to provide additional labour and support (Alston, 2000). This masculine dominance of rural societies is well-documented and is associated with the gendered character of agriculture (Liepins, 2000) and traditional household structures (Alston, 2000). The masculine identity in agriculture portrays farmers as 'men who are rugged, physically active in outdoor work, and knowledgeable and decisive in farm management' (Liepins, 2000 p. 612). Such perceptions are further constructed and reinforced by the rural media and farming organisations.

The study reported here explored in detail the self-perceptions and views of older male farmers about ageing. The research was grounded in the assumption that linkages between work, identity and gender are dynamic, change over the life course and are influenced by the individual's capacity to cope. Consequently, we explored the voices of rural masculine identities and how they perceive the changing demands associated with an ageing body. How do thoughts, feelings and experiences of older farmers regarding the ageing process impact on their view of life and working the land? Prior to detailing the methodology and results, relevant literatures are summarised.

Successful ageing

The concept of 'successful ageing' is relevant to the experience of aged farmers, although there is no single well-accepted definition or model of successful ageing. Havighurst (1961) defined it as 'adding life to the years' and 'getting satisfaction from life' (p. 9). Rowe and Kahn (1987) noted that many of the age-related changes historically regarded as a 'normal' part of ageing were preventable. Rowe and Kahn therefore proposed a model of 'successful ageing' that included (a) low-levels of disability, (b) high cognitive and functional capacity, and (c) active engagement in life. This definition is criticised by those who believe that physical illness and disability do not preclude successful ageing. Ryff (1989) defined successful ageing as positive or ideal functioning related to developmental work over the life course. Gibson (1995) stated that successful ageing 'refers to reaching one's potential and arriving at a level of physical, social, and psychological well-being in old age that is pleasing to both self and others.' (p. 279). In the Encyclopaedia of ageing, Palmore (1995) states that a comprehensive definition of successful ageing 'would combine survival (longevity), health (lack of disability), and life satisfaction (happiness).'. (p. 914).

Differing perspectives on successful ageing reflect various theoretical developments in the study of ageing. Disengagement theory takes the view that ageing individuals gradually withdraw or disengage from social roles as a natural response to lessened capabilities, diminished interest and societal disincentives for participation (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Activity theory, proposes that people age most successfully when they participate in a full round of daily activities (Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972). The continuity theory of ageing may be particularly relevant for ageing farmers (Atchley, 1972). This theory proposes that individuals age successfully when they continue the habits, preferences, lifestyles and relationships from midlife into late life. Late life may be a less radical break with the past for farmers than for other occupational groups. Another perspective is self-discrepancy theory which concerns harmony or disharmony in various aspects of the self-concept (Higgins, 1987). In this sense, a farmer may subscribe to an ideal self-image that requires qualities of 'toughness' and 'physical activity'. Perceived deficits associated with ageing could conflict with the robust ideal and create emotional distress. Conversely, congruence between the actual and ideal self should be related to positive outcomes.
This view is also supported by Baltes and Baltes (1990) who argued that self-discrepancy is reduced when older adults compensate for losses in some areas (e.g., physical health) by optimising selective abilities or personal attributes.

**Work and identity**

Cox (2001) emphasises that the link between work and identity occurs through "social and role aspects of an occupation, which an individual reacts to and is shaped by, whether or not he or she is financially rewarded for assuming these roles" (p. 221). An individual's work will, in time, shape personality, behaviour and feelings. The choice of occupation is strongly affected by the desire to establish, maintain and display a desired identity (Cox, 2001). However, relatively few studies have examined farmers, their work and identity (see Foskey, 2001, 2002; Webb, Cary & Gedens, 2002).

There is some evidence that many primary producers construct their sense of identity around their land and working life on that land (Kaine et al., 1997). Foskey (2002) emphasised the integration of work and identity among older farmers as being important. Her research found that work was more than simply a way to make money for a substantial proportion (75%) of her participants. Moreover, 79 percent stated that their main interest and pleasures in life were connected with their farm work and for 72 percent it was one of the most satisfying parts of their life. Also, Riley (1999) found that half of 427 beef producers were satisfied to very satisfied with farming as a career and only 14 percent were dissatisfied with farming.

Older farmers have traditionally been excluded as an identifiable population from gerontological literature involving rural elderly. Studies pertaining to older farmers tend to focus on retirement or impending retirement, which is likely to be structurally and qualitatively different for this group. This is an important consideration, as withdrawal from productive work by the older farmers is often gradual and moves from demanding to less demanding tasks as they age (Foner & Schwab, 1983). There is often no recognised retirement role in farming (Gasson & Errington, 1993). The older farmer may want to reduce his involvement over many years, having a long-term perspective which has been central to the culture of farming (Gray & Lawrence, 2001).

**Values and farming**

The research we present here on ageing farmers was driven by academic motivations, but also inspired by personal and occupational considerations. The first author's interest in farming stems from being married to a fourth generation farmer. Her family is faced with ageing parents and the impending farm succession planning. They are not alone. The neighbours and indeed the community that surrounds them seem to have a high proportion of ageing farmers. Among this farming fraternity, agrarian and masculine values are pervasive. These values underlie the social structures of farming which include the "social context of the family farm - the roles and relationships which the family farming system has created and maintained" (Gray, Lawrence, & Dunn, 1993; p.2). In turn, agrarian and masculine values have acted to maintain the family farm system, resulting in a unique industry. These values are considered next.

**Agrarian values**

The 'Family' farm has long dominated Australian agriculture. Almost 99 percent of Australian farms are family owned (Gray et al., 1993). This legacy has attained important cultural significance. However,
recent authors have voiced increasing fears that 'the family farm' might not withstand growing economic and other pressures for much longer (Lees, 1999). Subsequently, there has been an overall decrease in family farms from 254,000 in 1938, to 150,000 in 1986. The number of farming families has declined 22 percent in 17 years (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, 2003). This reduction is due in part to problems with farm succession. Historically, individuals brought up on farms wanted to continue the family legacy, not just because it was instilled in them, but because producing things from the soil was considered worthwhile. In recent times Crosby (1998) found that succession and inheritance are complex and protracted processes in the farming sector. She argued that the personal, social and business values of farmers, their families and the wider community influence the management of these processes. She also found that parents have not discussed succession and inheritance with their children in nearly a third of families with married sons working on the farm.

Over time, Australia has witnessed the development of a powerful agrarian ideology, which had its roots in early Australian nationalism. Flinn and Johnson (1974) describe agrarianism based on an historical analysis of events and editorials in farm journals published between 1850 and 1969. Agrarianism is conceived in broad terms as reaching beyond the production of food to include a wide collection of ideals, loyalties, sentiments, and hopes. It has been described by Flinn and Johnson (1974) as consisting of character, an ethical orientation and a set of economic practices. These characteristics are based on the firm truth that people everywhere are part of the land community - just as dependent as other living things on its fertility and just as shaped by its mysteries and potential. The traditional rural family life that is idealised involves a masculine relationship to place based on patriarchal system of inheritance and social relations (Alston, 1995).

**Masculinity**

A powerful agrarian ideology is highly gendered with Australian ‘myths of masculinity’ influenced by it (Alston, 1995). This accepted wisdom of identity sustains images of a front line built on mateship, masculine ideals and a sense of belonging and obligation to the community. Indeed, the importance of the land and a lifetime’s work on it has been cited as the focus of self-identity for rural men (Foskey, 2002). This is reflected in agrarian ideology which is based on the perception of farming as integrating hard work, perseverance and family life (Foskey & Avery, 2003). Subsequently, agrarian and masculine ideology attached to the family farming lifestyle play an important role in shaping the identity of the farming culture. Alston (1995) sums up the combination of agrarianism and rural masculinity by stating that prevailing rural ideology is strongly conservative:

> The traditional conservatism of farm families is based on ideals which have included an acceptance of male hegemony; a belief in the inalienable human right and freedom to use the land as one sees fit; and a strong rejection of welfare mentality. (p.16)

It is argued that this type of masculinity occupies a more dominant position than others (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinities are those ideologies that privilege some men (and women) by associating them with particular forms of power (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985). They are those masculinities which are the most powerful or most ‘honoured' within a social context (Connell, 2000). Moreover, substantial research exists on the ways in which dominant masculinities marginalise women and less powerful masculinities (Alston, 1995; Alston,
2000; Connell, 2000). By the twentieth century, hegemonic farming masculinity in Australia was associated with: (1) landownership or control over the land, (2) fatherhood within an inheritance system controlled by the patriarchal lineage, (3) performance of outdoor work, and (4) adherence to a strong Christian morality and Australian nationalist ideals (Alston, 1995).

Ecological meta-model for understanding ageing farmers

The influences of agrarianism and masculinities on identity development are consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological meta-model. Identity commonly describes the collection of presumably stable personal qualities and characteristics by which we are recognised and made known to self and others (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner suggests that interactions with others and the environment are central to human identity development and that we experience multiple environments. In this view, it is important to examine the gestalt of what defines successful ageing for farmers, by examining a variety of contexts. Each of these systems is characterised by roles, norms (expected behaviour) and relationships. These systems are vibrant, transform over an individual’s lifetime and influence the ability to successfully manage the stressors of life. According to Bronfenbrenner, when the relationship between different microsystems is a compatible one, development progresses more smoothly.

Given the multiple contexts that surround the farmer’s life, this study collected in-depth information through which participants used their ‘voice’ to reveal their ageing experience. The research focused on the experiences and identity of aged male farmers in relation to farming and ageing. Partly, such interest is in recognition that little research has focused on this cohort in relation to work and their identity. But primarily, it is a result of our belief that there is something revealing about ageing in the relationship between masculinity and work on the land. Qualitative data collection methods are essential in enabling us to tap into this relationship, by being reflexive, whilst accommodating our growing understanding of the meanings of ageing for men, particularly farmers.

Method of data collection and analysis

Design

The phenomenological methodology used in this study adheres to the following steps outlined by Hayes (2000): (a) setting aside researcher presuppositions about the phenomenon, that is, ‘bracketing’, (b) in-depth dialogical interviewing of participants, (c) reading interview transcripts for a sense of the whole, (d) doing line-by-line analysis to identify meaning units and themes, and (e) developing a thematic structure of the experience that is ultimately discussed and triangulated.

Participants

Sampling

A homogenous sampling strategy (Hayes, 2000) was used with defined selection criteria. The criteria were met if the informant was: 1) a male farmer aged 65 years or over, 2) willing to be interviewed, 3) either living (or had lived) on a rural property for most of his life, and 4) worked primarily in dry-area, mixed farming, with a focus on rural western NSW. The particular regional focus arose due to the first author living in that farming locality. The first few participants were asked to recommend friends or acquaintances who may also like to be interviewed. Participants
chose the interview site (typically their home), the time and a pseudonym. In total there were eight participants, which the authors decided were sufficient to provide meaningful insights. Consistent with guidelines for qualitative research of this type, sample size is less important than the richness of the data set and decisions about redundancy of collected information (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001; Hayes, 2000).

**Demographic information.**
Questions to elicit demographic information were asked at the beginning of each interview. A 'snapshot' of each participant is depicted in Table 1.

**Interviews**
A semi-structured interview approach was taken with the aim of discussing three broad topics: (a) meanings associated with becoming a farmer; (b) attitudes and beliefs about ageing, and (c) experience working on the land as an ageing farmer. The research was approved by the institutional Ethics in Human Research Committee and participants provided written informed consent. The interviews were approximately 60-90 minutes and were audio recorded. Standard questions and prompts were used to ensure consistency but respondents were allowed to talk about their experiences and views in-depth. The first author conducted the interviews, which raises an issue regarding gender and age influences on the interaction with older men. Silverman (2000) notes that respondents report a greater freedom to discuss sensitive topics when they perceive that the interviewer can relate to their life experience. The first author was actively involved in the farming industry and local community. She had known the men involved in the study to varying degrees, from very well to only by namesake. Most of the men interviewed, had lived in the same district for most of their lives. Participants seemed positively engaged in the interviews and happy to discuss the topics of interest.

**Data Analysis**
At the completion of each interview, the audiotape was transcribed, pseudonyms assigned and preliminary ideas recorded. A journal was also kept to record field notes and impressions of the interviewer. Each participant was sent a copy of his transcript to ensure that he was comfortable with the content. Subsequently, only two farmers made contact with the researchers. Their comments were positive and implied that the information was a true and accurate record of the interview.

The interviews were analysed using thematic-analysis to identify topics and key patterns that connect or underlie those

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<th>Participants Characteristics</th>
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<td>Tim</td>
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<td>Age (years)</td>
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topics. As suggested by Hayes (2000), each transcript was read several times to identify similar threads interwoven throughout the transcripts. Items of interest where noted and sorted into content topics. Field notes and observation comments were also examined in the process. The goal was to refine understanding of similarities and differences between content topics and to discover patterns that suggested important themes (Hayes, 2000). Themes that are drawn from the participants’ accounts ‘collaged’ to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience (Hayes, 2000). As themes began to emerge, segments of text congruent with the theme were identified.

Once the themes and related text were collated and the literature studied, a story began to emerge. Silverman (2000) states that when the literature is interwoven with the findings, the story that is constructed is one that stands with merit. It must also be acknowledged that our thematic analysis was influenced by diverse factors such as interviewer style, preconceptions, intellectual interaction between the authors and the reflexive process so important to qualitative methodology (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Analysis is not a discrete and final part of the research process. It runs alongside the data collection. Data were being analysed, even while collecting it by forming ideas, categories and opinions that later influence the interpretation. Thus, the reader is aware, that the following themes are the synthesis of theory, literature, data collection, analysis, and reflective activity that result in a form of ‘intellectual craftsmanship’ (Mills, 1959) emerging from two authors.

Discussion of key themes concerning ageing and farming

Theme 1: The narrative of ‘toughness’

This theme reflects the traditional agrarian ideology of toughness which emphasises masculine pride and investment in physical labour (Bryant, 1999). Liepins (1998) suggests that dominant rural masculinities involve constructions of the farmer as a hard worker, battling against environmental and economic obstructions and attempting to gain control over the natural landscape. Such constructions were evident among the farmers interviewed in this study. Working the land involved ‘hard work’ and sacrificing comfort in a way that other occupations may not. For one farmer this, ‘toughness’ was often perceived by others as being ‘crazy’ but there was a certain amount of pride in being physically strong:

Yes, toughness. tough it was tough alright there’s no doubt about that (laughs) yes, durability, you had to have a big heart, there is no doubt about that. uhm, I don’t know it’s a bit hard to explain isn’t it? (Laughs) That’s as people say ‘you had to have rocks in your head’. When we bought... [the] farm... they reckon I had rocks in my head for buying this farm (laughs) and that’s... all I had was an axe, a shovel, and crow bar (oh no, really?) an unregistered reddish Dodge Truck (right) and um... I lived out there under the pine trees for a fair while, and then um, Dad felt sorry for me, and got the caravan (yeah) but um, the mice shifted in after six months and I shifted out (laughs) (Matt.)
Not only was ‘toughness’ needed to endure the manual labour, it was important, if not a necessity, for coping with the uncertain climate:

You had to be tough you really had to be tough. You kept thinking next year is going to be alright, that keeps you going, you don’t work now, you work for next year (yep)... and uh, mostly, well most days (laughs)... you might have two reasonable bad years, not like this one, four in a row. (Matt)

The theme of toughness acknowledges the farmer’s perceptions of difficulties in his work, but it also acknowledges a certain level of pride and satisfaction that this toughness contributes to his self-concept.

Well, ah, that’s, that’s a negative thing. In those days, we had to sit on the tractor, [in the] open-air and you’d work 36 hours without stopping. Now they don’t let you drive two hours unless you go for a walk (laughs). And it’s uh, you know, we could do it easily. But I don’t think the young ones could now. They’ve been mollycoddled, and (laughs)... (Chris)

Not being tough may have negative consequences for farmers who turn down the rigours of farming in favour of the easier way of life associated with life off the farm.

Well you can’t go...if a job’s got to be done you have got to do it, you can’t leave it till next week. That’s in sowing and stripping, and all that; it’s got to be done. Things like that. You see all them blokes used to do that [but] they are all gone. Anyone who’s right on the ball is still here. (John)

Thus, the true ‘tough’ farmer is distinguished from those who are tempted away by other lifestyles.

It depends on the person, they could feel inadequate or they could get, ah...they could be a bit despondent and say ‘ah the hell with this’ and walk off. I think that might have happened to a neighbour...it just gets too complicated for them...it’s got really complicated. I admire some of the work that my son does, and I think ‘thank God. I am out of this’. (Chris)

In this respect, toughness serves as a resource for self-esteem and perceived control or ‘mastery’ (Pearlin et al., 1981). Keating (1987) states that for ‘farmers who feel self-confident and expect to solve problems successfully, stress may not be as severe as for those who feel their own efforts make little difference’ (p 359). Accordingly, toughness is perceived as a personal quality that enables a sense of control or self-determination.

This manifest theme emphasised that ‘toughness’ was a physical necessity to endure the hardships of the early pioneering farming days. In addition, there appeared to be unspoken or latent aspects to this theme in that the toughness narrative ‘paid dividends’ as the men have aged. Partly, this dividend comes in the currency of recognition and respect that others attach to achievements born of toughness. The result is pride in their accomplishment, a kind of nourishment for the self-concept and a powerful ethic for dealing with life. Thus, the narrative of toughness yields tangible and psychological benefits. It serves as a coping mechanism to mediate between the stress of farming and ‘getting the job done’. It is also a sustaining character trait that the ageing farmer wears with pride and that engenders respect.
Theme 2: 'Down-to-earth' view of ageing

This theme captures an essential aspect of the perspective on ageing. The 'down-to-earth' approach emphasised fortitude in the face of age-related decline. The sensory and physical changes that are inevitably associated with ageing were pre-eminent in farmers' accounts. Scant mention was made of other dimensions (emotional, cognitive, personality, relational, spiritual) or more subtle aspects of ageing.

So what have you noticed that's changed? (Interviewer)

Well, my eyesight is not as good, the hearing is not as good, [and] I got my own teeth. I'm going bald, and I'm too fat. Before Dad said ...he was going in the navy... when bullocks used to work they used to get fat and healthy and strong. The trouble is but... [for) the muscly man, when he grows old that muscle turns to fat. So my daughter tells me. (Tim)

Bill described his visual decline with a dose of humour, slightly irritated by the inconvenience of using glasses that would often break.

Yes, yeah, that's a humbug, this eyesight business. Instead of just looking at it and fixing it you got to find your glasses and put them on, you see. And then of course because you've got them in your pocket, one wing is crushed off it, and all the glass is broken. Ah yeah yeah. You... you... your... you got to get used to that. There's no doubt about it. But of course that would be in every phase of life. (Bill)

Belsky (1999) points out that the inevitable physical changes that occur with age (primary ageing) can be hastened by environmental and lifestyle influences (secondary ageing). Glen believed that his hearing loss was due to excessive noise whilst working:

Yeah industrial deafness. If I go somewhere out and, there's a lot of people and they're all talking, I just find it very difficult. You know, this is, as I said, you know this goes back to 1955, driving a tractor, there was no ear muffs on. (Glen)

Riley also described his hearing loss as a result of farming practices and elaborated on the social consequences:

Ah yeah hearing is the problem because people of my era, we went from the horses to the tractor. When we got on tractors, ear muffs weren't even made. [We've] driven the tractors, and we drove them for 12 hours, sometimes around the clock. No cabins, no hearing protection, and [if] you will [ask] anyone in my age group that it affected their hearing it's gone altogether. No, hearing's a big problem. I've got a hearing aid, but the fellow said to me that the way your hearing is, I don't think that a hearing aid is going to do you much good. But it picks up noises you don't want to hear... No hearing's a problem and I worry about it from a social aspect. You go out and you talk to people and half the time you can't hear what they're saying. But those days we didn't know anything about it, but it's too late. We should have been [aware] 40 years ago. (Riley)

Another age related change concerned physical strength.

Ah well. I can't lift. You can't run like you used to. I suppose years ago we used to run everywhere and things have changed you know. (Riley)

Physical strength peaks around 30 years of age and then gradually declines (Belsky, 1999). However, lifestyle and activity levels can mitigate some of the muscle loss associated with ageing. Certainly, a
common thread to this theme was that the farmers still participated in very active lifestyles:

*Keep working, you got to stay active oh yeah you’ve got to move around. If you don’t remain active then I think you fall in a heap pretty quick... I mean we should do more exercise. I love the time to walk. You know walking is good exercise for you so you’ve got to get out and do as much as you could. I’ve got an exercise bike in there. I should get on that and ride it every night or every morning and I never get there. But no I think it’s very important to keep active. Very active. See I went through a period with crook knee and I had to cut down the activity a bit but he gave me knee constructive and it’s improved a lot now and I remain fairly active.* (Riley)

Sometimes continuing physical activity has painful consequences.

*Well the day before yesterday, Tuesday. I went and helped my son put a new clutch in a tractor, an old 9G. front-end loader. The twisting of putting that clutch in, and turning around, I can hardly walk on Wednesday (laughs).* (Chris)

Chris went on to emphasise the importance of feeling needed and his willingness to work alongside his son regardless of ‘minor aches and pains’. In another account, Tim also described active engagement but with a more selective strategy for adapting to physical limitations. This view is also suggested by Baltes and Baltes (1990) who argued that self-discrepancy is reduced when older adults compensate for losses in some areas (e.g. physical health) by optimizing selective abilities or personal attributes.

*How have you adapted to that change? Do you do things differently?* (Interviewer)

I do anything that I am capable of doing, and can do. But, I feel myself bludging on [my] son. Because I know when he is around, there is a hell of lot of things I can do, climb up on top of a silo, which I will not do if he’s there. ‘Cause I let him do it (laughs). That’s another thing too. Well in the old days you didn’t have water laid on, and you can bet once in a week you’d be up on top of the windmill fixing the damn thing. And uh, jobs like that it’s, ah...I wouldn’t climb on top of a bloody windmill now. NO way. I still get on the silo when he is not there and shut the lid and that (laughs). (Tim)

Acceptance, resolute and ‘matter of fact’, was part of the ‘down-to-earth’ view of ageing.

*Yes, how do you feel about it?* (Interviewer)

*It’s a part of life isn’t it? There’s a lot of people that don’t make 68 so there is a lot to be thankful that... When I had my brain tumour there was five people that were close to us, (named) five, all related...all lost their lives, and I was the lucky one...so I got to be thankful that I am still here (yes my word).* (Matt)

The underlying narrative of this theme is a gritty acceptance of the more prosaic aspects of ageing. The emphasis on sensory and physical changes may stand out because of the obvious relevance to farming - past and present. It could also have been an artefact of the interview process. At a more intimate and revealing level, farmers’ perspective on ageing may extend to other personal domains, including those recognised as more stable or even growing with age. Regardless, for aged farmers and for those interacting with them, the ‘down to earth theme’ characterised here will likely be prominent.
Theme 3: Attachment to place

Attachment to place refers to the profound influence that living on the land has for ageing farmers. Low and Altman (1992) refer to an emotional connection that can develop and give meaning to location and experience. Farms on which these men live have acquired special emotional significance.

Yes. And uh. the only reason I came back on the farm. when I left school was because Dad had a heart attack. I was the last one. One sibling was away at university, and the other one was married, and I was the last one. I had to sort of come back to the farm. I didn't care if I was going to be a farmer or not. The more I stayed there the more it seemed natural. It was a terrific life, and I wouldn’t change it for the world. (Chris)

Chris became attached to place over time. Years of interacting in their environment create an attachment to place that gains special significance as farmers age. An intimate relationship may develop with the land, as one develops deep affection and love for another person.

So how important was living on the land to you then? (Interviewer)

Well I didn't think about it. I was just there... You know. (laughs) It wasn’t important...important to me. In the early days, it wasn’t important to me. But as the years went on, it got more and more important. (Chris)

According to Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992), place attachment can have special significance for the elderly. It can help maintain identity and a sense of continuity in the face of age-related changes and adjustments. The narrative of attachment emerging from this study emphasised farming as a way of life and as a strong emotional, almost biological, connection with the land:

Yeah, it’s... you sort of belong. You belong to the land. As you get older. It’s sort of part of you. You want to be buried there. It's yours. When we got married, my wife was ... she loves that place probably more than me. And, and uh... it’s just... grows on ya. (Chris)

So you develop an attachment? (Interviewer)

Ah yes, and you look after it. You do the best for the land. You don’t...it’s not a job anymore: it’s more of a love, than anything else. (Chris)

Farming is perceived as more than a job. It is a unique lifestyle that sets farmers apart from others and gives meaning to life even in hard times:

The lifestyle is what a lot of people like, not what you make. When I still see people get up in the morning and go to work, and uhm... got to be at work and can’t please themselves I still got no desire to be anything else. Like as bad as this might be... (Tom)

Bill hinted at a spiritual bond with the land similar to that expressed by Indigenous cultures:

Oh sure. sure...they talk about Aboriginals getting attached to the land. Well I can’t see why the same attachment can’t work on a white man. And when. ah. we sold out over ‘Wattle view’, I still miss the land that we sort of developed and got interested in. Ah well you certainly get attached to the [land] you know which paddocks produce the [pause]...Oh no there is certainly that yes. (Bill)

However, Tim explained that love of farming was not just linked to a spiritual bond but with financial success:
If they have done alright you know... if they have been lucky enough... there are a lot of good farmers had to walk off, through the drought or one thing or another. Yes I can understand the farmer being disappointed with it then. But anyone who has had a reasonable time it would get into your blood alright. ah yes. (Tim)

So you’re saying it’s driven by financial success rather than just developing this emotional attachment to it. (Interviewer)

Yep definitely financial. Oh yes. (Tim)

Whilst Tim’s view suggested that an emotional bond to the land was influenced by financial success, Riley spoke of business considerations intertwining with the traditional agricultural focus on manual labour and hard work.

I suppose it it’s yeah. That’s the biggest thing because the other part really hasn’t changed only the machinery has gotten bigger and bigger. No the biggest aspect is something that’s changed a lot has been you have to be a businessman now as well as a farmer. (Riley)

Although there are variations in the way ageing farmers develop attachment to their land, the end result is a source of identity, refuge, and comfort. Attachment to place is integral to the way old age is experienced and constructed. The farm affords independence by defining a unique space that is controlled by the aged farmer. The farm is a space for the men to pursue their personal interests. It is a vital facet of self-identity that matures with age. Attachment to place helps define the distinct culture that is valued by ageing farmers and nourishes them psychologically as they age. Just as the ‘toughness’ narrative appeared to pay dividends to a positive self-concept, the emotional bond to a unique and valued environment can have similar benefits.

**Theme 4: The importance of feeling productive and useful**

The narrative associated with this theme was often expressed in terms of continuing to contribute on the farm in a meaningful way and transferring knowledge to the next generation. It was apparent that new technology helped compensate for physical limitations.

When I started here, they had tractors, there was no cabins, and in, out in the weather, and pretty much, the weight of your clothing on you, nearly knocked you up as much as, what you’re doing, just to keep warm. When it’s cold, and when it’s hot you’re looking at the time to get under an umbrella or something. So, I think the biggest change was when we moved into cabins. And then, the real big improvement was air-conditioning. I don’t know if I would have kept farming unless that had happened. (Ben)

Despite obvious age-related physical changes, there was no mention of age-associated work impairment. Ageing was not equated with reduction in productivity. One explanation is the value placed on experience and the adaptations that affords. To be productive and useful involves adjusting to change and making transitions into different methods of operating.

Well I think you learn it. I think you learn it. You have certain, you have certain abilities, as a young person and then you acquire other skills as you, you know, as you blunder through this maze, you pick up all these other abilities through being, having to do it. If you don’t, that’s probably where you start to fall by the way. (Ben)
Learning how to operate new technology or new farming techniques may take longer to master, but is considered important if the farmer is to continue to contribute:

No, well I am also aware being slower on the uptake. Like, a young fella can get in a brand new tractor and he can just drive off and then press all the triggers and get everything right to work. And I might take half a day to learn the same thing, as he learns in half an hour. I, I am aware of that. But uh, I accept it as a fact of life, it's not nothing startling to me; I am not terribly upset about it. But uh... But I think these factors are offset by modern technology, which requires less effort you see. You haven't got to lift a bag of wheat on a truck like I used to. You use... an augur does it, you see. So, modern technology, it compensates, steadying down and getting slower. (Bill)

Ageing changes are acknowledged but productive potential is maximised by learning new skills. At the centre of this theme is the idea that chronological age is not a strong predictor of performance as it does not accurately reflect the adaptive capability of farmers.

What does that mean to the older farmer? (Interviewer)

Well I don’t know. The older farmer... I am still doing it, I’m still driving that header that’s stripping 400 acres and I know that it’s much more taxing to drive a header like that than it was to drive a horse plough to do 20 acres a day. It’s just the way farming is I suppose. I mean if you don’t get a bigger and keep up with the Joneses, I suppose is the way it goes, well you are going to get left behind. (Riley)

Tolson (1987) claims that ‘men are brought up to value work, as an end in itself, and to fix their personal identities around particular occupations’ (p. 13). For many ageing males, the work ethic transforms after retirement into the busy ethic which is a ‘logical attempt to manage a smooth transition from active work into a retirement phase’ (Ekerdt, 1986, p. 240). Given the range of tasks required to manage a farming enterprise and the process of succession to the younger generation, farming rarely fosters a distinct retirement phase. Thus, transforming a work ethic to a busy ethic may flow more naturally for ageing farmers.

Although trends are changing, farming still facilitates patterns of inheritance that ensure a degree of interdependency among the generations. Farmers tend to release control gradually when they are convinced that their sons are capable of performing and making sound decisions. Family succession is a gradual process guided by the older farmer. For the older farmer, this is an important and valued role.

No I don’t think you get it out of a book. I don’t think anyone could try to... and learn something out of a book. Well there might be an odd one. It is something you learn as you go along. Knowledge that has been passed on from one generation to another is very important... and that’s why you know... what’s the important thing about farming. What me dad told me, never overstock with too many stock, otherwise you’ll turn it into a dust bowl. That’s two of the things Dad said, you never overstock and have quality of stock and look after them. (Riley).

The term generativity has been used to refer to this process of caring about the next generation and being productive in a meaningful way (Erickson, cited in Belsky, 1999). Ageing farmers like to remain productive and useful, but they are conscious of being custodians of the land. For Ben, living off the land meant everything to him, but it was only ‘on loan’
and this 'loan' would extend to the next generation:

I always say, you've only got a loan of it. And then, the son gets a loan of it. To me, my family say, 'why don't you sell out', you know. But I mean... I just don't want to know about that. (Ben)

Ageing is constructed as a transitional stage. Even when limitations have to be acknowledged, transfer to a new generation can generate a sense of satisfaction

No... I think the successful farmer that has, his offspring helping them, that he's adjusting as he gets older, and uh, whose accepting the fact that he can't do what he used to do and he's letting the young fella do that. That's what I am doing all the time. 'Oh I can't do this, you do it', 'I can't understand this, you do it'. And uh, I, the process goes on. Like, nothing has stopped. (Bill)

Rather than disengagement, this theme highlights the process by which farmers accommodate to ageing. They find new roles on the farm that promote a sense of continuity and a rewarding sense of identity.

**Conclusions**

The themes that have been identified and explored situate the phenomena of ageing and farming for males. Our study was limited to single interviews with a relatively homogeneous sample of male farmers in a geographically circumscribed region. The identified themes may not be apparent in the narratives of all aged farmers, or for that matter to all of the interviewed farmers in this sample. The phenomenological foundations of the research acknowledge that various realities exist for members of a particular group, but that shared and soundly articulated understandings are also valuable. The themes we have identified can be explored in other samples using various methodologies. To more fully appreciate the meaning of ageing for farmers also requires an understanding of the multifaceted interaction of biological, psychological and sociological aspects of self as conceptualised by the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In this respect, the farmers' wife may be a critical factor that was not explored in the current study. Historical context is also important. The farmers of our study were raised in an era that valued independence, hard work and practical ideals - a reflection of agrarian ideology. These values promote the inevitability of ageing as part of the life-cycle and from that conviction particular meanings, such as the manifest themes, may be drawn.

It was helpful to demarcate the four themes described above but that does not imply the absence of overlap or interconnections. In fact, a core underlying dynamic seemed to provide deeper understanding of the manifest themes. Latent themes are hidden meanings which are not immediately apparent within the narratives (Matlin, 1995). Manifest themes evoke deeper meaning and we suggest 'nourishing the identity to maintain a positive self-concept' as an underlying dynamic for ageing farmers. Thus, the narrative of 'toughness', down-to-earth view of ageing, attachment to place, and feeling productive and useful all serve to support a personal experience of ageing and farming that nurtures the self-concept. It is not suggested that the older farmer will ignore or deny the ageing process; or that changes experienced in old age have no psychological effects. Rather, the underlying dynamic of nourishing the self-concept enables us to make sense of particular ways that male farmers adapt to ageing. From a constructivist perspective, what is required for a positive ageing experience is 'primarily a repertoire of resources for creating positive meanings' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 221). Indeed, an important resource is a 'deeply
developed interest in the surrounding world' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 221). The farming lifestyle for aged males can pay pleasing dividends for the self-concept as exemplified by the four themes. By articulating these themes that emerged from their own stories, we create a greater understanding of how old age is experienced, how new meaning is continually created and how successful ageing may be achieved. To this end, the last word will be left to Glen:

Ah yes, I mean, I just don’t know what I would do if I never had the interest. When I retire I mean, I'd be a pain wouldn't I dear? (looks at wife). I’d rather be uhm, like when I die I’d rather my ashes spread around the farm. That’s how dedicated to the farm I am. Yes. (Glen)

At the old paddock? (Interviewer)

Ah, ah well no I think up at ‘Mirabella’ that’s where I spent a good time there. See my idea, is everyone has got to get buried, but I mean, when you work at Telecom where are you? You’re not on the list. But when you’ve been on a farm all your life, and that’s it...that’s part of you. So, I just sort of think to return to it. You know. And, then the other thing is, life is who goes to the cemetery. If there was a bit of a plaque up there somewhere and you’re takin a mob of sheep past, you know, you could say...yeah Dad’s there...and that’s all you need is a thought. (Glen)

References


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