



How do older Australian farming couples construct generativity across the life course?: A narrative exploration



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ABSTRACT

Australian farming, predominantly based on a family farming model, reflects a distinct culture and identity within Australia. Generativity can be identified within the longstanding practice of patrilineal generational farm succession. However, the changing social, economic and environmental context facing farmers today, is now threatening the sustainability and viability of the family farming model. The outcome in Australia, as elsewhere, has been a significant decline in the number of farming families and a sharp reduction in the number of young people entering farming. Overall, farmers are increasingly aging on farm in two-person households and without a next generation to follow. In this scenario, the article presents research which aims to explore how older Australian couples construct generativity across their life course. The study draws on constructionist narrative research conducted in the Australian New South Wales Southern Riverina. Generativity, as presented by Erikson (1950) and Kotre (1996), is utilised as a theoretical frame by which to explore the meaning of generational family farming in six couples' stories of navigating later life challenges. Drawing on Gubrium and Holstein's (1998) 'narrative practice' analytic framework, this article examines tensions between couples' jointly constructed narratives and the grand narrative of Australian family farming. A 'narrative practice' approach permits examination of the meaning of experience, coherence, and the ways contexts, as well as stories of the past influence stories told about couples' present and future generative expression. This approach is highly consistent with the rapidly changing farming context where couples may be trying hard to construct a coherent story within a distinct family farming grand narrative under considerable tension. Findings show that in this context, and often in the absence of the next generation, there are visible changes in farming couples' expression of generativity. The grand narrative of Australian family farming is compromised and older farming couples are being pressured to develop a new script for aging. In some cases, this is also causing significant tensions between couples, particularly around individual constructions of retirement. These findings may have some resonance with farming in other western countries, where aging farmers are faced with broad social and economic change.

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Introduction

The key theoretical concept of generativity has traditionally been associated with mid-life, and broadly defined as the nurturance, care and concern for younger generations (Erikson, 1950, 1968, 1982). Initially conceptualized over 60 years ago as a core component within Erikson's (1950) theory of

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human development, contemporary theorists have developed generativity to form a multidimensional concept more appropriate to emotional and social wellbeing in later life (Kotre, 2004; McAdams, 2013; McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992; Villar, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that generativity is an appropriate theoretical framework for empirical studies of older people navigating later life stages (Schoklitsch & Baumann, 2012).

Across the world, the practice of patrilineal generational farm succession has been presented as a key expression of generative concern (Barclay, Foskey, & Reeve, 2007; Fischer & Burton, 2014; Price, 2012). This is the case within a tightly constructed family farming grand narrative (Bamberg, 2010), where the family farming model remains the most common form of agricultural enterprise globally (U.N., 2014). Australia is no exception to this, and generative expression has been narrowly defined by the pervasive farming culture as the staged transfer of physical farm work, farmer identity, status, control, and ownership to a male heir, ensuring family continuity with the land (Barclay et al., 2007).

Yet the literature suggests farm succession has been severely challenged in Australia over the past thirty years as a result of contextual changes (Barclay et al., 2007; Sappey, Hicks, Basu, Keogh, & Gupta, 2012). These include family changes including new gendered identities, changing inter-generational relationships, and the potential for conflict and concerns over equity, which may all impede generativity and influence succession outcomes (Alston, 2004; Crockett, 2004). Other concerns relate to changes to the farming context, and include ongoing issues such as farm practices, size, location and assets as well as the legal complexities of farming business structures (Charleston, 2003; Fischer & Burton, 2014). Further contemporary challenges that also impact on succession include issues such as globalisation (Alston, 2010), new technologies (Fischer & Burton, 2014), a rapidly changing climate (IPCC, 2014) and marked demographic change including the aging of Australian farmers and a decline in numbers of younger farmers (Rogers, Barr, O'Callaghan, Brumby, & Warburton, 2013). The end result is that many farms, instead of being traditional multi-generational enterprises, are actually being managed by aging farming couples. Further, final phases of farm succession such as transfer of land ownership are linked to the death or retirement of older generations (Harris, Mishra, & Williams, 2012), yet older Australian farmers are now postponing retirement in response to contemporary socio-economic challenges (Alston, Whittenbury, & Haynes, 2010), posing further obstacles to generativity. This complex and changing scenario is presenting some major dilemmas for aging farming couples and challenging traditional understandings of generativity in the Australian family farming context.

Despite these dilemmas, Chiswell and Loble (2015) note that farm succession remains under researched, with a paucity of empirical studies. This is surprising considering the centrality of succession to family farm continuity globally. Yet, it may be that what is needed are new, more theoretical approaches to explore the unprecedented challenges faced in the contemporary farming context. Thus, this article proposes to use generativity as a theoretical lens in order to provide new understandings of older Australian farming couples' lived experience in the contemporary socio-economic context. Generativity is particularly appropriate in this new and challenging context, especially as McAdams (2001, p. 146)

argues that "historical cohorts may show different understandings of what generativity is and should be". Thus, the intent of this article is to provide a theoretically driven analysis of how constructions of generativity may be changing over time within the Australian generational family farming context through addressing the research question, "how do older Australian farming couples construct generativity across the life course?"

Background

The Australian farming context

This study is firmly located within the Australian context, which has some unique features, yet there are also important cross-cultural parallels with other western farming contexts. The cultural and social influence of family farming has strongly informed the national identity of Australia as well as other colonized nations including the United States of America (USA), Canada and New Zealand, which all share pioneer beginnings. Australia is geographically very large, with agricultural regions representing 52 per cent of its land area (ABS, 2013), although much of this is marginal land subject to extremes of climate. In contemporary Australia, at least 90% of farms remain operated by families (Alston, 2010). Farming symbolism is central to the meaning of being Australian, particularly a rural Australian, and has been expressed in music (Jones, 2007), art (Astbury, 1985) and literature (Cronin, 1984; Furphy, 1962; Paterson, 1992). The dignity of rural work associated with characteristics of hardship, mateship, independence, resilience and heroism shapes a distinct Australian generational farming culture which continues to be romanticized in the psyche of the nation (O'Callaghan & Warburton, 2016). Thus, while the family farming model is pervasive across the world, it has specific features in Australia in its historical tradition and strong link to national identity.

This well-established family farming model is threatened in the current economic, environmental and social context. Impacts of globalization have resulted in Australian family farms becoming economically unviable, with many increasing in size to enable sustainability and profitability (Alston, 2010; Brett, 2011), with increased corporate and contract farming (Lawrence, 2005), features of the adjustment and restructuring occurring in the industry. This is manifesting at a time when Australian farming remains in the recovery period following the 'millennium drought', a decade of unprecedented high temperatures and reduced rainfall (Kirby, Bark, Connor, Qureshi, & Keyworth, 2014), immediately followed by significant environmental events such as flood and bush fire associated with climate change. Importantly, Fischer and Burton (2014) point out the potential for disaster and hardship to irreparably fracture the endogenous farm succession cycle. Ramifications include older farmers postponing retirement (Alston et al., 2010) and discouraging young people's entry into farming, which, in some cases, may be associated with a reluctance to pass on the burden of considerable debt (Barr, 2009).

Australian farmer numbers are decreasing rapidly and consistent with global trends, the proportion of aging farmers is rapidly increasing as the numbers from younger generations entering farming declines (ABS, 2012; Barclay et al., 2007). Rogers et al. (2013) propose that the current period is unlike previous eras, with demographic change resulting in a social

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