



# The development and validation of a collective occupational identity construct (COIC) in a natural resource context



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 February 2015

Received in revised form

5 June 2015

Accepted 22 June 2015

Available online 9 July 2015

### Keywords:

Occupation

Agriculture

Rural transition

Scale development

## ABSTRACT

The trend to multifunctional rural landscapes in developed economies is characterised by the contrasting values, land uses and land management practices of rural property owners. In agricultural regions, it seems these trends are, at least in part, an expression of the extent rural landholders identify as farmers. Investigation of these trends has been hampered by the absence of robust approaches to measuring occupational identity amongst rural landholders. Research discussed in this paper addresses that gap. The objective was to develop a valid, reliable and efficient measure of occupational identity. We did that using the collective identity construct (CIC) and adapted a widely accepted 17-item CIC scale to explore the extent rural landholders in south eastern Australia held a farmer identity. Drawing on a survey of 1900 rural landholders we assessed the reliability, validity and utility of that scale. Those tests resulted in a 12-item scale that we suggest provides a valid and reliable measure of occupational identity that can be applied in natural resource management contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural areas are increasingly trending away from the traditional agrarian countryside towards multifunctional landscapes. The number of individuals farming full-time is on the decline and those farming part-time or not at all is on the rise (Mendham et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2003). Indeed, full-time farmers<sup>1</sup> account for less than 50% of principal operators in the United States in 2012 (United States Department of Agriculture (2014)) and rural regions in Australia (Curtis and Mendham, 2011). In Australia, the number of primary producers identifying as farmers declined 11% in the five years preceding 2011 (ABS, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1. Multifunctionality and occupational identity

In Australia and the United States rural areas are increasingly multifunctional, in that the character of many areas are being shaped by a mix of production, consumption and conservation values (Abrams and Bliss, 2012; Holmes, 2006). Agriculture may remain the dominant land use, but primary production is not the principal focus of all landholders. There is evidence that landholders who make their living from the land adopt different natural resource management (NRM) practices from those who are part-time farmers or non-farmers (Gosnell et al., 2007; Mendham and Curtis, 2010). As the non-farmer cohort of rural landholders increases, it is expected that occupational identity will be an increasingly important factor affecting NRM (Gosnell et al., 2007; Mendham et al., 2012).

Researchers examining these trends have typically employed self-identification by rural landholders or drawn inferences from data perceived as related (e.g., size of farm, extent of off-farm work and income) to explore the influence of occupational identity on NRM (Mendham and Curtis, 2010; Paquette and Domon, 2003). Quite commonly, researchers have asked survey respondents to self-declare their principal occupation. This approach may be

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<sup>1</sup> Based upon a stated primary occupation.

<sup>2</sup> ABS defines a 'farmer' as an individual who reported their main occupation as farmer or farm manager.

sound (Groth et al., 2014), particularly where identity is not expected to be a critical variable, but as will be explained, self-declaration draws on only part of collective identity theory as conceptualized in the psychological literature.

The collective identity construct (CIC) developed by Ashmore et al. (2004) has been cited in 415 papers<sup>3</sup> but has not previously been applied in the NRM context. The CIC is a theoretically derived measure designed to assess identities that are shared by individuals including that of occupational identity. This construct appears to provide a solid foundation for researchers setting out to explore the nature and role of occupational identity in NRM. In this paper we reflect on our use of the CIC to develop a valid and reliable scale to measure occupational identity in surveys of rural landholders. In the next sections we provide a brief overview of contemporary approaches to the investigation of occupational identity in NRM, introduce the concept of collective identity, and explain how we tested and revised the scale developed by Ashmore et al. (2004) using data collected in south eastern Australia.

### 1.2. Assessing occupational identity amongst rural landholders: the gap

As Emtage et al. (2006) highlighted, there has been limited attention to the non-farming cohort of rural landholders despite evidence that non-farming identities are likely to be significant influences on NRM in rural landscapes. Some quantitative studies have asked respondents to self-declare their occupation using either the selection of a pre-defined descriptor or an open-ended question (Curtis and Mendham, 2012; Race et al., 2012). This approach has intuitive appeal, is efficient in that the item(s) occupy a small space in a survey and has been shown to effectively distinguish farmers and non-farmer landholders (Groth et al., 2014; Postmes et al., 2013). However, using self-declaration to derive a collective (and occupational) identity may be problematic in that this approach draws on only one dimension of what may be conceptualized as a multi-faceted concept.

Studies show that the farmer self-concept is multi-faceted and is comprised of multiple identities within itself (e.g. agricultural producer and/or conservationist) “each with different notions of what comprises good farming practice and each capable of becoming the focus for action” (Burton and Wilson, 2006, p.100). Issues relating to what ‘good farming’ means and how this conceptualization reflects back on an individuals’ farming skills and social cultural capital (Burton, 2004; Burton and Wilson, 2006) is another facet relating to farmer identity. Farming is often viewed as more than just a job – a way of life with a deeper meaning than just a form of employment (Vanclay, 2004). Indeed, the autonomy associated with farming is viewed as a core value of a farmer identity (Stock and Forney, 2014). That independence is often hampered by competition from other farmers (Emery, 2015) and the fear of exposure to other farmers relating to the perceived implementation of bad land management and, ultimately, decreased reputation (Emery and Franks, 2012).

The hierarchy of identities that an individual holds changes to meet his or her context as does the definition of ‘good farming’ ideals (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012). Off farm income can contribute to a changed perspective of farm life from one that is focused on work to one with an end goal of personal satisfaction (Sutherland, 2012). This change from a full-time to a part-time farmer may compromise the individually held definition of a

‘real farmer’ (Forney and Stock, 2014). The shift of occupations in the farming community lead to confounding results of identity measures that rely on self-declaration as individuals may now relate to more groups than before (Wilson et al., 2013). Often, rural landowners do not see themselves as being able to be classified simply as one type of farming landholder; they exhibit and identify with multiple characteristics of a variety of landholders. Indeed, landowners may not be willing to associate with a term that is identified as socially undesirable (Howden and Vanclay, 2000). These trends complicate what being a farmer entails as conceptualizations of this term may be influenced not only by engaging in agricultural production but may also include a variety of other concepts that were not traditionally linked with the concept of a farmer identity.

### 1.3. Collective identity construct: a possible way forward

The CIC (Ashmore et al., 2004) is based on identity theory and contains seven distinct dimensions designed to assess the relative strength of an individual's collective identity (briefly defined in Table 1). The CIC is conceptualized around the dimension of self-categorisation (e.g., does the individual perceive him/herself to be a member of a particular group). This self-categorisation then is viewed as influencing the remaining six dimensions of the construct. Suggested measures to operationalise the seven dimensions can be found in Ashmore et al. (2004).

### 1.4. Occupational identity and the collective identity construct

An occupational identity (OI) is one in which its “members’ sense of identity is closely tied to its occupation” (Carroll and Lee, 1990). Petrzelka et al. (2006) developed a scale to measure the strength of natural resource-based OI. In this research, they identified two main facets of resource-based OI: involvement with the occupation during the individual's ‘off’ time, and attachment to natural resources. Involvement was rated in four voluntary natural resource based groups (e.g. local watershed council). Attachment to natural resources was measured by a respondent's ratings for two statements regarding importance of the landscape. This early effort to measure OI in a natural resource context appears to touch on only the CIC dimensions of behavioural involvement and importance. Nunkoo and Gursoy (2012) added to the approach of Petrzelka and colleagues by including five additional survey items measuring involvement with local natural resource organisations. Stoner et al. (2011) utilized some of the elements of the CIC construct to test the possibility of developing a scale applicable to a variety of identities (e.g. identities based upon organization, social group, and family). While their resulting scale was not relevant to the assessment of occupational identity in the NRM context, their research has informed our approach.

The research explained in this paper therefore extends on these earlier attempts to develop a measure of occupational identity in the NRM context. The objective was to assess whether it is possible to classify rural landholders based on occupational identity using the CIC in a self-administered survey. In doing so we addressed three questions:

1. Do the seven dimensions of CIC form a valid and reliable scale to measure occupational identity amongst rural landholders?
2. Are some dimensions of CIC better predictors of OI amongst rural landholders?
3. Does CIC distinguish between farmers, part-time farmers and non-farmers?

<sup>3</sup> As indicated by Scopus – accessed January 12, 2015.

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