What is the role of place identity in older farming couples' retirement considerations?

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ABSTRACT
The contemporary farming context across western countries is experiencing a period of dramatic demographic, social, environmental and economic change. This is having a significant impact particularly in countries such as Australia with a long culture of generational family farming sustained by patrilineal farm succession. Generational farmers maintain strong attachment and unique relationships with place as farms are both homes and sites of production. Retirement involves a reconfiguration of place identity and in the context of change, farming couples contemplating retirement now face unprecedented challenges as they age, with the younger generation reluctant to follow. Drawing on Australian data, this article utilises place identity theory to examine the role of place identity in older farming couples' retirement considerations. Findings are drawn from a 'small story' narrative study of six older generational farming couples, all still actively farming the land. A small story approach permits examination of the ways couples position retirement and how place identity affects couples' agency as they contemplate retirement. The collection of data across two time points, 18 months apart, enabled couples to reflect on how they individually and collectively viewed retirement over time. Findings suggest that the uni-dimensionality of farming men's place identities may be marginalising women as couples navigate the prospect of retirement. The implications of this study are broader than the Australian context as the family farming model remains the most prevalent form of agricultural enterprise across the world.

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1. Introduction
The generational family farming model remains the most common form of agricultural production globally and Australia is no exception, with more than 90% of Australian farms owned and operated by families (Alston, 2010b). The family farming culture has been reified over time to form a grand narrative or ubiquitous way of understanding the world (Naples, 1994; Brandth, 2002), an approach that legitimizes and perpetuates power and knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). According to Cheshire et al. (2013), a tightly constructed and enduring family farming grand narrative includes the cultural practice of patrilineal farm inheritance and entrenched farming practices, with farmers' identity framed by multiple place related features. Place becomes a critical construct, with Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) describing 'place identity' as the relationships people have with places. Across the Western world, family farming's unique relationships with place include the perpetuation of generational ownership as well as the farm as family home and a site of production (Tanewski et al., 2000).

Yet in the current era dramatic contextual changes are occurring and impacting farmers' place identity by threatening their traditional relationships with place which have endured across generations. In Australia, the incremental and catastrophic impacts of climate change such as drought, flood and bushfire are dramatically altering physical landscapes, particularly over the past two decades (Department of Agriculture, 2014). Further concerns over water usage are resulting in changes to irrigation farming practices (Downey et al., 2013). At the same time, Wheeler et al. (2012) point out that the impacts of globalisation and restructuring are resulting in fewer but larger farms, as Australian farmers attempt to remain viable. These issues are global problems that have unique ramifications for older farmers contemplating retirement within the tight confines of the Australian generational family farming grand narrative.
Australia, like many other Western nations, is undergoing dramatic population ageing with the first wave baby boomer cohort reaching the traditional retirement age of 65. This demographic trend is reflected in the agricultural sector where the number of older Australian farmers is increasing dramatically. At the same time there is a marked decrease in numbers of younger farmers (ABS/ABARE/BRS, 2009). The result is that approximately half (48%) of the 93,000 Australian farming family households now comprise a couple living alone, without a younger generation to follow (ABS, 2012). This scenario is similar to other Western nations such as the USA and Canada (Canada, 2006; USDA, 2012). Importantly, Wheeler et al. (2012) point out that in Australia, the absence of the younger generations has resulted in the practice of farm succession decreasing. As a result, generational ownership and attachment to land is ending. In this context, tensions may arise between older farming couples’ contemporary experience and central, place-related elements of the grand narrative of Australian family farming. This scenario suggests the critical need to examine the role of place identity as older farming couples contemplate their retirement.

In long term farming, couples share extensive histories of relationship and business partnership. Yet, differences between individual place identities within couples, as well as their co-construction of place identities at a time when they are considering retirement remain topics overlooked in the literature. To date, Australian studies of farmer retirement have focussed on men; strongly suggesting that retirement within the grand narrative of Australian family farming is a contested, and in some cases a threatening, concept (Barclay et al., 2007; O’Callaghan and Warburton, 2016). However, far less is known about the role of place in older farming couples’ retirement considerations. The few studies of this phenomena link retirement to social and physical meanings of place in diverse and gendered ways, in terms of the symbolism of the farm house for women (Gill, 2008), the centrality of place to farming men’s identities (O’Callaghan and Warburton, 2016) and the farm as superannuation (Barclay et al., 2007).

The last decade has seen an emerging interest in those ageing in rural places (Keating, 2008; Joseph and Skinner, 2012), and it is now well established that place assumes an important role in maintaining identity as people age, offering opportunities for redefinition, stability and refuge during periods of change such as retirement (Winterton and Warburton, 2012). Retirement from employment usually involves a clear loss of role as well as a repositioning within the social matrix and this has implications for identity (Breakwell, 1986). Rubinstein (1990) and Golant (2003) suggest that place attachment, defined as the emotional ties enabled by a long term, deep experience of and involvement with place (Shamai and llatov, 2005), may inform a sense of identity as people age. The environmental psychology literature suggests that place attachment is but one aspect of peoples’ multidimensional relationships with place acting as a precursor to the development of place identity (Patterson and Williams, 2005; Williams et al., 1992). On the other hand, place identity is a broader concept developed through daily interactions with place and encompassing the feeling of belonging (Cuba and Hummon, 1993), as well as the symbolic and personal meanings attributed to place. It is these factors which permit self-identification to, and differentiation from, others and serve as an important locus and symbolic extension of the self (Pretty et al., 2003).

The literature suggests that farming is more than occupational identity (Groth et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2013). Farmers’ identity is inextricably intertwined with place in multiple ways including through iterative farming practices as well as social, emotional and generational relationships with the family farm (McGuire et al., 2013; Riley, 2016). Older farming couples contemplating retirement face unique and gendered issues relating to their changing relationships with place. Some older farmers remain in place following the transfer of the farm to a son whilst others sell the farm and relocate (Sappey et al., 2012). Thus, it can be argued that place identity theory is an appropriate framework for empirical studies of farmers’ later life. Addressing the research question ‘What is the role of place identity in older farming couples’ retirement considerations?’ this article utilizes Twigger-Ross and Uzzell’s (1996) adaptation of Breakwell’s (1986) identity process theory (IPT) to explore how diverse and complex relationships between place and identity processes are navigated by older farming couples as they consider retirement together.

2. Background

Twigger-Ross (2013) defines place as a fluid concept comprising physical spaces, the meanings we attribute to those spaces and what we do within them. Yet, Watson (2014) highlights the difficulty of defining a physical and social construct so various and changeable as Australian rural place. On one hand, rural Australia has been mythologised over time, to comprise ‘symbolic landscapes’; places marked by imagined characteristics of strong social capital, independence, stoicism, hard work and adventure (Watson, 2014). These gendered cultural and social values continue to be expressed in the arts (Astbury, 1985; Jones, 2007; Hogan, 2010), remaining central to the nation’s notions of itself. Importantly, such relationships between rural place and identity have cross-cultural parallels with other western countries which share similar frontier histories. Yet, the rural idyll is challenged in the contemporary socio-politico-economic and environmental contexts by the impacts of boom and bust economies, rural service deprivation, geographical isolation, youth out-migration, population ageing and climate change (Keating, 2008; Skinner and Hanlon, 2016). Australian family farming, embedded in place and perpetuated by patrilineal farm succession is now caught between these diverse constructions, and this may be challenging the ways older farming couples think about place and retirement.

Place identity has been shown to influence perception and behaviour in diverse contexts, including, for example, the ways students evaluate their school’s image (Marcouyeux and Fleury-Bahi, 2010) and how public housing residents participate in energy saving innovations (Gustavsson and Elander, 2016). These studies strongly suggest that place identity, informed by a sense of belonging to place, influences people’s engagement in change. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell’s (1996) conceptualisation of ‘place identity’, a term describing the cognitive relationships people have with places, may facilitate understandings of the role of place identity as older farming couples contemplate retirement together.

Kirpatrick (2012) suggests the elusiveness of the concept, ‘retired farmer’, noting that many reject the concept of full retirement and its association with the loss of a strong attachment to the farm, the lifestyle and the independence farming provides. The role of place is very different in the two retirement patterns that are characteristic of Australian farming. One pattern is characterised by a type of semi-retirement; a gradual withdrawal by older generations from physical work, management and decision-making, resulting in a final stage of transfer of land ownership to younger generations, with older farmers remaining on farm, or close by in town, yet maintaining a relationship with the farm until death (Barclay et al., 2007). The other pattern presents retirement as older farmers relocating following the sale of the family farm outside the family (Sappey et al., 2012). Both scenarios require a reworking of older farmers’ place identity yet one permits generational continuity, as well as an ongoing physical connection with the land whilst in the other such relationships are severed. Yet, the current
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