Agrarian pragmatics: How women on family farms in Queensland, Australia negotiate competing discourses to enact their agrarian ideals

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ABSTRACT

Based on a new ethnographic study in south-western Queensland Australia, we explore the evolving discourses that inform the roles and lives of women in farm family enterprises. We find that agrarianism, as one of those discourses, powerfully motivates the substantial contributions women make to the construction, reproduction and maintenance of family farms, farm families, and land stewardship. The women in the study experience two other main discursive realities in their farm lives: long-standing traditional masculine hegemony and more recently, neo-liberal concepts of farm-as-business. These two narratives however can be leveraged to realize agrarian ideals through a form of agrarian pragmatics that bodes well for gender equity and land stewardship within a more contemporary form of agrarianism.

1. Introduction

Understanding the motivations and wellbeing goals of women on family farms is important for policy-makers, practitioners and communities in supporting the substantial contributions women make to the construction, reproduction and maintenance of family farms, farm families, and land stewardship. Women already play a substantial and essential role in the farm sector, in Australia and elsewhere, which includes the office work of planning, management, bookwork, technology and finances, as well as outside work in production (Pini, 2005). A 2009 research report commissioned by the Australian Government found that 'it is likely that women contribute over 49 per cent of the total value of the output that might be attributed to farming communities', representing a slight increase over the preceding 10 years (Sheridan and McKenzie, 2009: 5–6). Around 55 % of Australia's land use is agriculture (ABARES, 2024), of which family farms constitute over 90 % (Daly, 2019). In Queensland, where the study that is the subject of this article took place, the broadacre grazing industry is the steward of around 86 % of the states' land (Knudsen and Muller, 2017: 6). Thus, understanding and supporting women in farm families is crucial for the success of the agricultural sector, and more broadly, for land stewardship in Australia.

As described in Section 2 below, the three principal discourses that co-constitute the life worlds of women on farms in Australia are masculine hegemony, the farm-as-business, and agrarianism. These have emerged from social-political-historical factors broader than any specific community, but learning about the ways in which they are adopted, adapted or resisted at the local level can give us a deeper understanding of the roles, lives and contribution of women in farm family enterprises. Based on a new ethnographic study in south-western Queensland, Australia, we explore the ways these discourses are evolving. We find that, in the face of obstacles presented by masculine hegemony and the farm-as-business, agrarianism powerfully motivates the substantial contributions women make to the construction, reproduction and maintenance of family farms, farm families, and land stewardship. The women in this study resisted notions of land as a commodity and instead, perceived land as valuable for other purposes: healthy intergenerational family homes, recreation, fulfilling spiritual and connection with nature needs, food and fibre production, and farming as a calling.

Our paper focuses on the research question: How do farm women negotiate the sometimes inimical discourses of masculine hegemony and farm-as-business to enact their agrarian ideals? We describe these processes of negotiation, as 'agrarian pragmatics.' Pragmatics, originating in the field of linguistics, is 'the study of the practical aspects of human action and thought' and concerns itself with how context contributes to meaning (Centre for Linguistic Research, 2025). In this article we examine the wider context in which women have found practical ways to realize the agrarian dream, by navigating other powerful discourses,

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and drawing on their own prior knowledge and experience.[1]

We illustrate in our analysis how a Foucauldian view of rural discourses can acknowledge the prevailing power networks and also highlight the 'points of resistance':

> … discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault, 1978: 95, 101).

For example, the patriarchal tradition of father-to-son succession plans represents not only masculine hegemony but also the importance of intergenerational farming and hence security in realizing agrarian ideals, where land is more than a commodity. The farming-as-a-business discourse provides opportunities for women to contribute to the technical and financial management or the farm, thus accruing influence and a measure of gender equity, a point of resistance to masculine hegemony. We find that agrarian ideals provide both a criterion for farming women's wellbeing and a motivation to act in ways that support the intergenerational endurance of the family farm, secure their position within a farming family, and build an enduring agrarian lifestyle for themselves and their family, based on love of the land. The women navigated these discourses by the careful deployment of resilience and empowerment strategies. Any navigation and negotiation skills the women possessed upon entry to the farm family were enhanced during the integrative acculturation they experienced when they first married into farm families. These processes empower women to have significant influence in their farm enterprises after an often extended period of uncertainty of several decades which can vary from a few years to several decades.

In the literature review below (Section 2) we introduce the main discourses, masculine hegemony, the neo-liberal farm-as-business, and agrarianism, and the concepts of acculturation, resilience and empowerment. Section 3 explains the adoption of an ethnographic methodology and the specific methods employed. In Section 4, 'Voices of the women participants,' we use the ethnographic data to demonstrate the ways in which the women navigated the dominant discourses, supported by their ideal of agrarianism including love of the land, and utilising resilience and empowerment strategies that drew on integrative acculturation processes. The discussion in Section 5 draws together our findings in terms of the confluences of power and Foucauldian points of resistance that have empowered these women. In the conclusion (Section 6), we point to the ways in which studies such as these will also support policy-makers and practitioners working with the farm sector on issues such as environmental degradation and climate change.

2. Literature review

2.1. Masculine hegemony

Settlement policies in the early 19th century sought to replace the Aboriginal population with what governments regarded as hard-working, capable, practical white people, who could achieve a range of outcomes: food production for the colony and then the fledgling nation; a dominant white settler class; and increased export revenues (Frawley, 2014; Miller, 2015; Voyce, 2007). In the process, government narratives and cultural texts (Waterhouse, 2000: 221) described the type of people best suited for this work:

> A stable economy was believed to be most effectively achieved through a patriarchal form of family structure based on the values

that privileged productive male labour. Such a goal endorsed the notion of classical economics that defined women in terms of their status as dependents and as mothers and housewives … This prioritisation was seen as necessary to keep the farm viable in the long term. The hegemonic values of male labour ('power') were endorsed in a variety of different discoveries of 18th-century science ('knowledge') (Voyce, 2007: 138).

This masculine hegemony, which continues today as the analysis below demonstrates, occurs not only in Australia but in many other agricultural communities (Sheridan et al., 2021: 4), including, for example, those of Wales and Norway (Price, 2010), Italy (Cavicchioli et al., 2018), Ireland (Cassidy, 2019), the United States (Wright and Annes, 2016) and Tanzania (Baird et al., 2024).

Issues of succession and family finances to ensure the farm's long-term survival reflect the patrilineal nature of farming families (Falkiner et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2021), and the cautious, even suspicious approach to new wives (Luhrs, 2016; Newsome et al., 2024b). Sheridan et al. (2021: 4) note in their systematic review of international literature on farm succession that 'sons experience a strong socialisation process into the role of farmer from birth, developing a "natural" successor identity.' While there is little recent data on changes in Australian farm succession patterns, a 2023 literature review (Blumson, 2023: 19–21) suggests that the rate of inheritance by women is 10 %; an update to this data would appear to be underway (Newsome et al., 2024a).

As Sheridan et al. (2021: 5) note, there is widespread acceptance among farm daughters of patrilineal succession, and of masculine hegemony in general. Our analysis in Section 4 reveals however that in this study most of the women are determined to change this discourse and include their daughters in succession planning.

2.2. Farm-as-business

During the 1800s, the imperatives of providing food for the new British colony and developing an export income saw Australian (colonial) governments promoting land acquisition, dispossessing Aboriginal people from their traditional lands, and providing financial and other support for squatters[2] and large landholders. In accord with the spirit of agrarianism, the government strongly supported farm families and their enterprises until the 1970s, when neo-liberalism, a very different discourse, emerged in Australia and internationally. The neo-liberal message to farm families was to perceive the farm as a business that must stand on its own in a market-based economy, and to regard their land as a commodity (O'Keeffe, 2017).

Farmers found themselves in a 'post-exceptionalist' policy and regulatory space (Grohmann and Feindt, 2024: 1; O'Keeffe, 2017) required to see farming as a business rather than a calling, and to take responsibility for all aspects of their farms, to stand or fall depending on their own capacity for efficiency, risk-management and productivity (Lawrence et al., 2013: 31, 36). Smaller rural communities had their government support withdrawn, including support to rural services such as schools(McInnerney, 2020) and price stabilisation authorities were disbanded (Cockfield and Botterill, 2012a; O'Keeffe, 2017; Pomeroy, 2015). A farmer's connection with a particular landholding, or sense of custodianship of the land, was devalued:

> Considering agriculture as a normal part of the market has enabled the commoditisation of land as a new asset class, allowing for foreign investment and speculation, with little regulatory buffering to prevent Australia's food-producing lands being used for biofuel

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[1] We distinguish *agrarian pragmatics* – the context-dependent practical aspects of realizing a meaningful agrarian ideal – from 'agrarian pragmatism', an established philosophical approach to resolving problems Thompson, P.B., 2023. From Silo to Spoon: Local and Global Food Ethics. Oxford University Press.

[2] A squatter in this context is someone who settles upon new, uncultivated, or 'unoccupied' land without any legal title and without payment of rent. Up until the 1980s, the concept of *terra nullius* in Australia meant that existing Aboriginal occupation of land was unacknowledged, and Aboriginal lands could be taken by non-Aboriginal settlers without negotiation or recompense.

production, coal seam gas extraction, or even as an 'off-shore farm' for oil-rich nations. The exposure of farmers to the 'get big or get out' doctrine of neoliberal capitalism has undermined the public good that can accrue from the traditional format of family-farm ownership (Lawrence et al., 2013: 37).

These neoliberal farm-as-business settings continue to dominate Australian agriculture. In addition, and in contradiction to the neoliberal discourse of farmland as a commodity, there are now increasing demands from governments for farmers to improve and utilise their natural capital for environmental sustainability (Hinkson, 2022; Knudsen and Muller, 2017: 9) and 'meet global environmental, social and governance principles' (National Farmers Federation, 2024).

The farm-as-business discourse initially excluded women from decision-making roles and increased their workloads (Alston, 2009; Newsome, 2020; Newsome et al., 2024b; Stehlik et al., 2000), which is still a high risk for women in a productivist discourse that promotes efficiency and productivity over family and community, views land as a commodity rather than something imbued with meaning and multiple roles, and privileges profits over people and traditions (Baldwin et al., 2019; Birch, 2017; O'Keeffe, 2017). Analysis of the ethnographic data in Section 4 suggests that some elements of this discourse are important factors both in terms of the burdens it imposes on women but also the opportunities it provides for their empowerment.

2.3. Agrarianism

While the literature suggests that agrarianism as an underpinning philosophy for government policy in Australia has been waning for many decades (although still strong in the public imagination) (Cockfield and Botterill, 2012b), McInnerney's study found that agrarianism was the best way to describe the values and ideals that motivated the women to adjust to, and remain committed to, life on the farm. We use 'agrarianism' here as inclusive of Major's 'new agrarianism' i.e. 'proper, careful, and ethical land use informed by tradition, community, and culture' (Major, 2011: 12). More closely, there is a 'focus on the localized transactions, the seasonal rhythms of growth and decay, habitual modes of tending the land, and the relationships required to sustain harmony or smooth functioning of the cultivated ecosystem' (McBride III, 2023: 134, citing Thompson, 2010). This form of agrarianism is about both a way of relating to the land and a cultural way of life that encompasses the idea of the rural idyll, including 'peace, security, health, prosperity, home, family and a close-knit community' (Harvey, 2009: 356).

Since the first white settlers in Australia dramatically changed the way land was used, owned and managed, violently wresting it from the stewardship of Indigenous nations (Edmonds, 2016; Frawley, 2014; Goodall, 1996; Reynolds, 1998; Ryan et al., 2017; Stanner, 2010 (1969)), questions have been posed regarding the best use of rural-/agricultural land. Liz Carlisle has coined the term 'critical agrarianism' to encompass a form of agrarianism that addresses both wider sustainability issues and social justice: 'in the practice of linking people and land, past and present, critical agrarians continually question and reshape the very category of agrarian, toward a more just and sustainable future' (Carlisle, 2014: 136). Addressing gender inequalities, such as men controlling land and capital while women contribute unpaid labour, means 'asking what types of work we celebrate as "agrarian," who we label "the farmer," who we teach to use the tractor, and who is expected to do the unromanticized work of reproducing the agrarian household—that is, the laundry, the dishes, the taxes and the wage work that provides health insurance' (Carlisle, 2014: 138). As our study reveals, these issues are being addressed by women through a range of strategies that empower them on the family farm.

2.4. Acculturation and interpellation

One of the significant stresses for new wives on family farms is learning to conform with expectations about, for example, their role in the family and the community, and supporting the priorities that ensure the viability of the farm itself. The process of meeting these expectations through interactions with the family and community is that of acculturation: a series of "cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation" (Berry, 2005: 699). Acculturation theory considers contextual factors to be crucial (Lopez-Class et al., 2011), and can apply to a group or an individual entering a new culture. Acculturation can occur through processes such as 'cultural shedding and cultural learning' (Berry, 2005: 707). The former involves 'the selective, accidental or deliberate loss of behaviours' (Berry, 2005: 707) from the previous culture, while cultural learning involves the development of new behaviours for a better fit in the new situation.

Integrative acculturation in particular means that the newcomer retains a high degree of affiliation with their original culture as well as developing a strong affiliation with the new culture they are entering (Berry, 2005). Integration is part of positive acculturation, where there is respectful and mutually accommodating interaction between the old and new groups and is associated with higher levels of wellbeing (Kelly, 2016: 158). Integrative acculturation can also be understood as an empowerment process where newcomers embark on 'an active, multidimensional and ecological process' (Paloma et al., 2010: 101). In this way, they develop critical awareness and the capacity to take advantage of opportunities to integrate while maintaining connections with the previous culture.

Subjectivities or discursive identities such as those of rural women, are also a response to the ways in which individuals are treated and spoken to, or 'interpellated' by the people around them, and within the discourses that permeate the social world they inhabit, "the multiple hailings of families, the media and the education system" (Bunch, 2013: 42). This idea is closely aligned with the concept of acculturation. Moreover, the experience of uncertainty undergone by most people in a new situation can promote heightened awareness, attentiveness, experimentation, and willingness to learn (Albertyn and Bennett, 2021). The benefit of a desire to reduce uncertainty is that it can facilitate learning and contribute to individuals identifying with new role identities (Stets and Burke, 2000).

In Section 4 we demonstrate the ways in which women on farms are 'hailed' in terms that reveal the expectations of the roles and behaviours they will perform, as part of the process of acculturation. It also becomes clear that attentiveness and willingness to learn are important aspects of women's resilience and empowerment strategies as defined in Subsection 2.5 below.

2.5. Resilience and empowerment strategies

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of resilience is understood as a suite of adaptation capacities used to safeguard wellbeing in situations of risk and adversity and enacted iteratively with empowerment to mitigate adversities (Brodsky and Cattaneo, 2013: 335). Empowerment processes which aim to change the status quo have elsewhere been referred to as social learning (Cutter et al., 2008) and as transformational resilience (Bahadur and Tanner, 2014) or transformational adaptation (Gosnell et al., 2019; Rickards and Howden, 2011). Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013) distinguish between resilience strategies such as coping when situations are too difficult to change, and empowerment strategies when there are opportunities to change power structures. For women in farm situations, an increase in decision-making authority leading to bargaining power is often used as an indicator of empowerment (Acosta et al., 2020: 1213).

In Brodsky and Cattaneo's (2013) model, a person in a situation of risk or adversity can iteratively work through processes of resilience until they assess the situation as sufficiently stabilised to provide

opportunities for empowerment. The two key dimensions used to determine whether to use resilience or empowerment measures are the levels of risk and the magnitude of change desired (Brodsky and Cattaneo, 2013: 339). Essential components of this model are the central imperatives of awareness, intention, action, reflection and maintenance. The model emphasises that awareness means both cognisance of the risks in a situation as well as an understanding that these dangers or adversities are not right; in other words, there is resistance to the dominant narrative. Awareness and intention to "set, strive, and maintain goals aimed at making a difference" (Brodsky and Cattaneo, 2013: 335) lead to thoughtful, well-reasoned actions, and when the risk is lessened, to the use of empowerment strategies.

In Section 4, we see rural women's application of these ideas and strategies as part of an agrarian pragmatics that helps them to realize their wellbeing goals.

3. Ethnographic approach and methods

Like many of the women she interviewed, McInnerney had experienced an open-ended curiosity and some uncertainty in her first encounters with Australian farm culture when she moved from Canada and married into an agricultural family in South West Queensland in the 1990s. This curiosity was re-engaged when the same culture was approached with an ethnographer's lens. Ethnography as a methodology is particularly well suited to research that looks to understand local worlds and "human agency in the context of social and institutional discourse and that can attend to the influence of history" (Cerwonka, 2007: 14). The interviews with women on family farms in South-West Queensland, provide a nuanced picture of the way that women exert agency within the prevailing discourses that co-constitute the idea of 'a farming life'.

The ethnographic methods employed consisted of observation and in-depth multiple semi-structured interviews with 20 women connected to farm families through significant relationships or marriage over 2018–2019 in order to elicit nuanced information, life situations, opinions and discursive perspectives Transcripts of the interviews were sent to each participant for their verification and feedback. The first four participants were known to McInnerney and the remaining sixteen were recruited through the snowball technique, as participants identified other potentially interested women in the region. Participants were selected to cover a range of age groups, spanning each decade of life from the late 20s up to 70s, with one participant in her 80s. The backgrounds of the women also varied, although they reflect a common trend in that most had tertiary qualifications. The farms on which the women live represented different areas of agricultural production: grain growing, cattle and sheep grazing, and cotton production. They live on large properties ranging from 7000 acres to over 100,000 acres in a semi-arid climate, on soils that are most suitable for grazing but in some areas can support broadacre farming. The industry newspapers, journals and the families themselves most often use the terms 'graziers', 'producers' and 'growers.' Due to remoteness, the women face significant challenges in accessing off-farm work and live at considerable distances from their neighbours and small or large towns.

The central areas of the Darling Downs and South West Queensland (see Fig. 1) were selected for two reasons: McInnerney had lived and worked in this region for many years and had a wide range of contacts; the region is agricultural and dominated by family farm enterprises, thus providing potential recruits for a study of women in farm family units.

Table 1 provides details of the women who participated. Participants have been anonymised, in accordance with the ethics approval[3] obtained from the University of [name withheld for peer review].

The voices of these women reveal the ways in which they have negotiated and navigated the social-political-historical discourses

described in Section 2. In the following section, we analyse and draw examples from the ethnographic data to illuminate women's agency within these discourses.

4. Voices of the women participants

In the interview data below, we can identify women's strategies for navigating the demands of masculine hegemony and farm-as-business while pursuing their own wellbeing. The interviews indicate that masculine hegemony and farm-as-business in their own way support women in sharing a commitment to the idea of the farm as something to be held across generations, a priority arising from the agrarian ideal in its settler-colonial form. (This commitment includes the case where 'the farm' is transferred to a new geographical location but with the same family members). Through demonstrating a 'farm first' commitment to their husbands and their husbands' families, most of the women interviewed were able to realize their desire for life on the land, while becoming resilient, and often empowered, in the face of new demands.

The presentation of the ethnographic data below shows clearly how the three principal discourses described above were strongly present, but also nuanced and evolving, in the lives of the participants.

4.1. Masculine hegemony

Most of the women in this study were initially daughters-in-law of the owners of the farm. Many, when first marrying into families on the land, experienced disorientation as they struggled to understand the culture of the family and/or the sector. Before they married, most of the participants were not aware of the dominance of the husband's family in many aspects of their lives. As Grace (60s, producer) said: 'you are not marrying the bloke, you are marrying the family'.

While some of the literature suggests that the loyalty and hard on-farm work of the women and their contributions to farm expenses from their off-farm work are attributable to their indoctrination into the patriarchal norms (Chiswell, 2016; Luhrs, 2016), the reality, as we shall see, is more complex. This research reveals that rather than being indoctrinated, the women are fully cognisant of the masculine hegemony in their lives, resist and subvert it when possible, but they work hard and support the farm due in large part to their agrarian ideals. The women overwhelmingly acknowledge the existence of male dominance in most spheres of agricultural life, including farms, agricultural organisations, and businesses. They suggest that there continues to be a marked separation of women's and men's roles on farms and in rural communities, and much of women's work on farms is not paid or recognised.

'It's still a man's world out here' said Jessie, (30s, producer), raised on a broadacre farm, and newly married into another producer family. This was the general view expressed directly or indirectly by the participants, with reactions ranging from irritation and outrage to bemused acceptance. Within this patriarchal context, most of the women as daughters-in-law, especially during the early years of their marriages, endured uncertainty, exclusion, anxiety and marginalisation. As Maddison (30s, producer) said, if they knew whether they were likely to inherit the farm, they could make plans. If they were not going to inherit, "if it's not going to my husband, which is fine, it would be nice to start making plans for that now". Maddison asked her father-in-law about their future:

> I remember once being hormonal and pregnant and asking about it and being shot down completely. I was told 'That's none of your business, it's all inside [father-in-law's head], you'll find out about it when I die and that's the closest you're ever going to get to it.' I was 100 % shot down, would never bring it up ever again.

Many of the women, like Maddison, were excluded initially from the family information or discussions about succession. Other women were denied access to family resources, such as having an income. Olivia, a
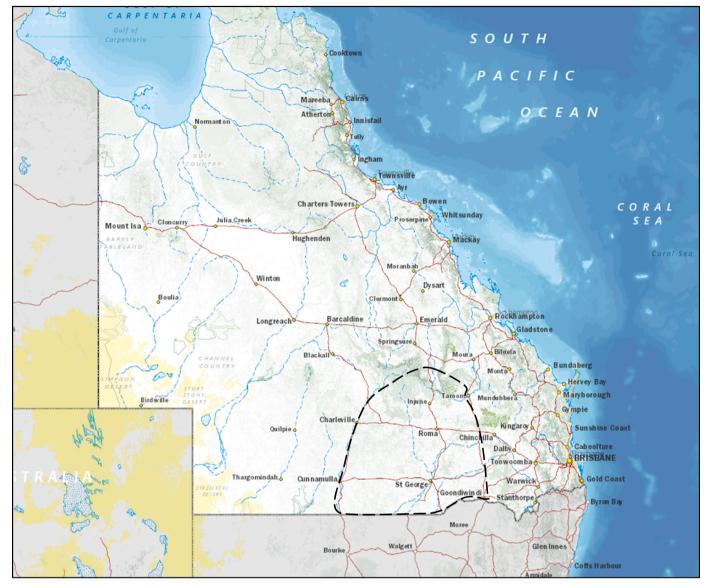
Fig. 1. Area of Study (dashed line)
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Outlined area added by authors.

tertiary-educated career woman was unable to work when she and her husband bought a more remote property. She was not interested in the 'outside' farm work, and her husband would not 'let her near' the bookwork. She embarked on volunteer work, and then began long-distance study. However, owing to the disapproval of her husband, 'I was actually not allowed to finish that'. He told her to stop studying, and he would not pay for the course. Without a job, Olivia was dependent on her husband: 'I do miss that independence of having your own income to do what you will'. Olivia, having just turned 70 at the time of the interview, encapsulated the situation of several of the older participants.

Patrilineal norms ensured the continuance of male ownership. Jessie (30s, producer) gave an example of a neighbouring family's succession plan, where 'the three boys each got a farm, and the girls each got $200'. As a daughter in a producer family at that time, Jessie thought this was unfair.

Patriarchal attitudes also extend into the community and the rural business sector. Some of the women spoke of being belittled by male suppliers and tradesmen when they were trying to do agriculture-related business. Lena (40s, producer) explained that the banks still would not lend to women trying to get into farming:

Certainly, the role of women is extremely slow to change to the point where I know that women will not get the same level of finance from the banks if they go out and run a farm and are without a male partner, certainly not a large farm.

… Basically, if I wanted to continue to farm, I would never farm in my own right as a woman in my own family … I mean, they helped a lot, but it was mostly given to the son. So, I married up the road and married a guy who was into agriculture as well.

Several of the women revealed that their husbands felt an inter-generational responsibility that not only impacted on decisions regarding infrastructure, but also about selling the property, with several women noting the difficulty of such a decision.

… so now I can't get my husband to sell because it's so many generations on that land, that feeling of – I don't know – accountability to give the opportunity to another generation is quite strong, yeah. (Grace, 60s, producer)

However most of the women, while resistant to the masculine hegemony evident in agricultural families, accepted the traditional priority

Table 1
Ethnography participants.

Pseudonym	Age decade	Agricultural operation	Background – including birth family upbringing – urban, small town or farm
Abbie	40s	Grain, sheep	Urban, mother from land, father rural business
Beth	50s	Cattle	Currently urban, grew up on a farm
Cassie	50s	Cattle	Grew up on a grazing property
Diane	60s	Sheep	Grew up on a sheep property
Emily	30s	Grain, cattle	Urban, but parents had hobby farm
Felicity	30s	Grain, sheep	Grew up on dairy farm
Grace	60s	Grain, sheep, cotton	Grew up on a grazing station
Helen	50s	Sheep	Urban
Isabelle	80s	Sheep	Grew up on sheep station
Jess	30s	Grain	Grew up on grain/cattle property
Kate	20s	Grain	Currently urban, dating farm son, grew up on grain and cattle property
Lena	40s	Grain, cattle	Grew up on grain/cattle property
Maddison	40s	Grain, sheep	Grew up in small rural town, hobby farm nearby
Nora	70s	Cattle	Grew up on small dairy farm
Olivia	70s	Grain, Cattle	Urban
Penny	50s	Grain, cattle	Small rural town
Quentin	30s	Grain, cattle	Urban
Raili	30s	Grain, cotton	Urban
Sarah	30s	Grain	Currently urban but was in long-term relationship with a farm son, grew up on grain and cattle property
Tess	50s	Cattle	Small rural town, acreage, business degree and vet nurse

given to the family farm, and, as a result, the necessity of all members of the family to be working towards the development and continuance of the farm. Learning to share these priorities and accept the family dynamics that support them, for example, succession planning, was one part of the integrative acculturation process (Berry, 2005; van der Zee and van Oudenhoven, 2022) experienced by most of the women as newcomers to the family. Approximately half of the interview participants were from urban areas; the others grew up on farms and hence were familiar with some types of farm culture. However, even for the brides from farm families, taking up a role as wife and daughter-in-law in a new farm family represented a shift in customs and expected behaviours similar in some ways to the kind of cultural shift discussed by Berry (2005). The husband's family saw the new spouse as an outsider who needed to prove herself as a worthy (and long-term) contributor to the farm and who put the farm first. Acculturation meant a sharing of the family's 'farm first' ethos; Abbie (40s, producer) stated:

> The family farm. It is … like an empire. It is overwhelmingly what everyone is working towards and if you're not working towards that you might as well leave the game.

Many of the interviewees who were over 40 years old described their experience of masculine hegemony through a story of initial adjustment problems when first married, the authoritative role and power held by their husband's father (and in one of two cases, their husband's mother), difficulties with their husband's family and/or the situation, a process of acculturation and adaptation, an often-protracted struggle to gain a measure of stability and security, usually involving resolution of succession issues, and then contentment and satisfaction with their situation, the work and the family. This contentment seems to align with the cessation of uncertainty, as well as the realisation of their agrarian ideals. The literature suggests that the relative happiness of older rural women might be attributed to a spiritual connection with the land, as women ' … between 45 and 64 living on farms reported even higher life satisfaction, feelings of belonging and a sense of personal power (Harvey, 2007: 6); our research contributes the notion that the relief arising from certainty about their financial and emotional positions within the farm family and farm financial structure may be a

contributing factor to this high life satisfaction. The younger women, in contrast, expressed more on-going and current distress.

(Some) acceptance of masculine hegemony was closely connected with acculturation to other aspects of farm life, including class distinctions to be observed, and appropriate roles for women. Tess (50s, grazier) experienced clear social directives from her husband's family. She was told by her father-in-law that ' … one didn't mix with the managers but mixed with the owners'. Her mother-in-law was even more specific: 'I don't think you should be mixing with so-and-so.' This is an example of the acculturation processes, the development of new behaviours for a better fit in the new situation (Berry, 2005). By identifying the people who are to be excluded from the social life of farm owners, Tess's parents-in-law built a picture of what 'acceptable membership … in the category looks like' (Barrett, 2005: 87) and what behaviours would best fit Tess's situation. The women observed these social roles because they did not want to risk being 'ousted' on any level, socially or emotionally, within the community or their husband's family. Cassie (50s, grazier), for instance, would not accept invitations for herself and her children to barbeques or community events when her husband was away, for fear of being 'ousted'.

Most of the women chose, or gradually adapted to, what we described earlier as integrative acculturation, judiciously incorporating some aspects of the new farm culture, while maintaining connection with cultural norms of their previous life. For example, Tess complied with the social restrictions in general but developed and maintained at least one friendship with a woman in the forbidden category (manager's wife), acting on a value she had continued to hold: the importance of friendships. A theme in each woman's acculturation and acceptance (to some extent) of masculine hegemony was concern that rejection by her husband's family could result not only in economic insecurity for herself, her children and even her husband, but also loss of her now highly valued agrarian life. The majority of the participants employed resilience strategies of awareness, intention, action, retreat and self-care, as well as adaptation, withstanding and careful resistance in their interactions with their husbands' families, as the risks of expulsion were too great for direct confrontations. Two participants in their 40s chose to express their concerns in a direct way, and were sidelined from the family. One, with her husband, were physically expelled from the farm. Several of the participants told stories of other people they knew who had been expelled in this way. The majority of the women waited until there was less risk before utilising empowerment strategies such as speaking up.

Most of the women between the ages of 40 and 70, who were able to do so, gave their daughters and their daughters-in-law more support than they themselves had received. Many women who grew up on farms lamented the lack of support for them to take up farming as a calling. The women under 40 planned to incorporate their daughters and daughters-in-law into succession plans and they indicated that their husbands were in agreement. This may signify a generational attitudinal change, at least in this area of Queensland. (A forthcoming study of succession practices may provide updated data in this regard (Newsome et al., 2024a)). Grace (60s, producer) undertook babysitting duties to facilitate her daughter-in-law attending significant farm meetings such as those with the bank. She also instituted family meetings which included the spouses of her adult children so that they could be fully informed about the farm finances and other issues. As they became more knowledgeable, the younger women developed the confidence to participate in decision-making. For example, Penny (50s, producer) was attempting to help her son's girlfriend, who lived on the property with him, to feel comfortable and find a niche for herself within the business. Diane (60s, grazier) was planning to transition their current property to her daughter and her daughter's husband at an appropriate time. Several women with young children were incorporating their daughters into succession plans.

An important finding arising from interviews with the women is that, alongside their strategic negotiation for more gender equity, both for

themselves and for their daughters through succession, the traditional conservative masculine hegemony reinforced the value of living on the land and the importance of the family farm. The conservative, traditional patriarchal discourse provided them with an identity, and job security for the husband and sons. The patrilineal tradition increased the probability that the husband, son of the owners, and his family might inherit the farm. Some of the women mentioned that they liked the assurance of the longevity of marriages in a conservative, rural culture, and being able to bring their children up in a safe place with conservative values. Thus, the women adopted those elements of the traditional patriarchal discourse which served their intergenerational agrarian goals.

4.2. Farm-as-business

We noted earlier that the farm-as-business discourse initially did not view women as decision-makers. However, in McInnerney's interviews with women it was clear that most were involved in providing the necessities for farm-as-business, using computer and other technologies to administer finances, develop business plans and deal with banks and other agencies. This involvement was an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the farm operation, and for some, to become decision-makers within farm operations. Strategically, it enabled them to navigate the sector's masculine hegemony in pursuit of living their agrarian ideal and to make contributions on an equal footing with their husbands. This finding extends brief observations in the literature that the contemporary requirement for the use of computer technology was increasing the influence of women in farms (Hay, 2018; Hay and Pearce, 2014). It is however also worth noting Clune and Downey's (2022: 262) point that, at least on farms with financial difficulties, the division of roles in which women more often work 'indoors' on business administration can result in 'disconnect in the flow of information between the farming partners, resulting in uninformed expenditure and investment decisions'. This is one indication of the need for partnership in decision-making, something many of the participants in this study had successfully created.

Working on the financial aspects of the farm enterprise enabled many of the women in this study to participate effectively in the high-level management of the enterprises:

Many women on the land are business women, running farms and making decisions in relation to their businesses. Often, they don't start out this way. The current generation can be tertiary educated, mature aged on entry, having had a professional career. (Grace, 60s, producer)

The women described their various roles in the increasingly complex social, agronomy and business environments:

Well, basically, I made the final decisions on money. Drew [husband], we'd work out what we might want to do, or he would work something out and then I'd work out the economics of it because I actually liked accounting, I like money, well, I'm treasurer of my apartment's [body corporate'] association, treasurer of the croquet club. But yeah, I really think that I had a lot to do with the progress that we were able to make from one property to three and making those decisions economically. We'd both go to the bank manager but I'd tend to, I must admit, take over the conversation. I think I had a lot to do with the decision making financially.

[My husband] would decide that whether we were planting something or - but the more I got to know the cattle, the more I knew what we should be doing with them and everything else, but he'd decide it was time for agistment or time for whatever, the way you coped with drought. It became a joint decision influenced by the economics of it all. (Norah, 70s, producer)

Once the participants understood the finances and economics of the

situation, they were able to become genuinely involved in decision-making, since decisions were increasingly based on economic criteria. Many women were involved in all aspects of the farm enterprise, with the business aspects underpinning the other roles:

You've got to know your farm and the conditions and a fair idea of the weather. I guess you've got to be pragmatic about the weather and the financial situation. You've got to assess your feed outlooks, establish stocking rates. You've got to offload, establish timelines for buying in feed or not and your water and fencing, and understanding the limited or diminishing cashflow, equity and options forwards. So that's just the business side of it.

Then, on the person side, you've got to establish individual and family values and goals, and I think that's the crucial thing. If you know your values and goals and your abilities and your willingness to forge ahead or be involved for everyone, and you've got to follow your instinct and gut feelings, respecting decisions, communicating, supporting and having a go, and trying again. (Grace, 60s, producer)

Many of the women applied a holistic perspective to the farm management, combining financial knowledge, human resource management, agronomic, market and weather knowledge, and family psychology.

Nevertheless, successive governments' neoliberal approach to the farm sector including withdrawal of government-funded services and facilities, on farm and in their communities, has meant more on- and off-farm work for women to maintain the viability of their farms in a new regulatory environment. Reduced resourcing of local schools has also impacted on the women, requiring them to dedicate many hours to ensuring education for their children.

Usually the mainstays of their communities, they have struggled to find time to invest in community activities of. Cassie (50s, grazier) noted the decreased availability of women to volunteer for local committees:

We looked around the other night at our Race Committee meeting and realised it has been the same people for the last 20 or 30 years. The younger women are too busy now – doing more work on their places – quite a few have [off-farm] jobs as well … also busy with driving kids to school and boarding school.

Nevertheless, the interviews revealed that the women's agrarian aspirations framed farming-as-business as a strategy to achieve, maintain or even expand the family's land holdings. Felicity (30s, producer), who asserted that 'I would consider ourselves business people before I'd consider ourselves farmers' also maintained that she and her husband were always going to be farmers; that is what they did best: 'what we're good at is being farmers.' Felicity, like many of the other participants, found that her computer skills and previous employment experiences positioned her to work collaboratively with her husband. She is an example of the cohort who successfully accomplished integrative acculturation, and were able to empower themselves in part through their business skills.

4.3. Agrarianism

In women on farms in South-West Queensland, we can see aspects of what we described above as new agrarianism. This includes the superior value placed by the women on the farming way of life, values and custodianship of the land. The majority of the women in the study expressed some or several agrarian ideals and feelings. Their perspectives on agrarianism included love of the land, the desirability of families staying on the land for many generations, feelings and actions concerning land stewardship, living and working within a farm family as a privileged and superior lifestyle, pride and satisfaction in the work. There is also the symbolic capital and financial opportunities of farm ownership, the advantages of bringing children up on a family farm – children 'learn a really good ethos because of your work ethos' (Emily,

30s, producer). Several of the women in the study emphasised their 'connection to the land, [a] sense of self as part of the landscape' (Grace, 60s, producer). Some framed this feeling as a spiritual connection:

> … there's a real emotional pull to a land … that spiritual pull … You put your heart and soul into it ….You try to make it better each generation … the way you look after the land … (Penny, 50s, producer)

There are feelings of intense grief and loss if the connection with the farm is broken. Kate (20s, producer's daughter) when asked in her joint interview with a friend, what her childhood was like on their farm, burst into tears. Her friend asked: 'Do you feel like it's a bit of a loss of a dream?' Kate said, through her tears 'Yeah. We've just sold the family property. It is objectively a good thing but it's still hard'. Other women who were no longer involved in family farming due to a marriage breakdown or financial loss of the farm grieved for the loss of contact with the land and the culture, and the loss of identity. Beth (50s, producer), lost contact with the land and the 'western culture that I missed so much', so much so that she felt she was a 'nobody':

> I avoided reading the latest in the industry as I found it too difficult to deal with because I didn't feel a part of it … it hurt too much …

The threats to wellbeing within the agrarian discourse encompassed fears of the deterioration or death of the land and stock, the mental toll taken by environmental degradation, the perils of risky normative rural behaviour and agricultural work practices, and the distress of having to leave the land for a range of reasons. From another perspective, the agrarian values of love of the land, pride in their agricultural production, hard work, self-sufficiency and competence, a sense of the advantages or superiority of life on the land and the desire to provide this opportunity to their children underpinned the wellbeing aspirations of most of the participants and became the motivating discourse for women's resilience and empowerment.

The idea that the farm is of the highest importance arises from the agrarian ideal as well as from the traditional patriarchal discourse. Accepting this ideal is part of the acculturation process the women undergo when first entering their new farm families. The land, the lifestyle and the family farm enterprise are interlocked in the pursuit of one powerful goal: building and maintaining the farm. There are benefits and disadvantages to enrolment in such a project. For example, Maddison (40s, producer) and her husband and children live in the second house on the property.

> My in-laws own everything, having total control of all farm income and my husband is actually really effectively just contracted to work for them, so they [pay] him for the hours of work that he does. However, there are benefits; we don't pay for our house, we don't pay for electricity, but we do pay for things like phone, our own fuel, groceries, but the farm takes care of our major [expenses] – it's like an incentive for working on the farm.

Many of the participants appreciate the contrast with the urban environment:

> I love living in the bush because it is a calming environment. It's peaceful, it's natural, it's in touch with nature and I do love that. It's great to look out and see wide open spaces rather than houses right there as well (Cassie, 50s, grazier).

As well as their appreciation of the beauty of their environment, several women reflected that they had the kind of access to natural spaces for which people from the cities had to pay. Participants spoke of their opportunities for walks, motor bike riding, swimming in the dams and other outdoor activities for themselves and their children, which are not readily available in urban areas:

> I think the open fields and sunsets, you know, those good little moments that people spend weeks planning for their weekend away

where they can trek and get that same experience. I live that experience (Emily, 30s, producer).

Beth captured the sentiments of many of the other women:

> I love the expanse of a wide horizon … I love the sound of birds and the breeze in the trees. I find I take deep breaths when I'm experiencing any of those things … I love the smell of rain, fresh green grass, good hay, the perfume of flowering trees and shrubs, the smell of cattle, horses and even the smell of their manure (Beth, 50s, grazier).

Many of the women commented on the community spirit 'in the bush' being always available in times of crisis. This community support contributed to a sense of protection and wellbeing in a physical, sometimes risky, environment. This sense of strong community was highlighted in times of adversity such as flooding:

> That community is – and when you see it in a bad situation, it is really a fantastic thing to live in, because people just rally … we've seen it up there and the people that have come with helicopters and mates helping mates and one of our neighbours pulled out – they had ten people arrive and they pulled 1000 sheep out. … I'm not sure what it gives, but it gives you something that you go, wow, you would not get that in town. You don't quite get the same thing (Lena, 40s, grazier).

Some expressed that it was important to have purpose, such as 'feeding the world' (Raili, 30s, producer) and improving the land to 'try to make it better each generation (Penny, 50s, producer).

The desire to be on the land and to raise their children on the land motivated the women to work hard and make sacrifices to attain and maintain access to the land. They felt the necessity to be mechanically and physically capable, and the skills necessary were facilitated by the farm environment. They talked about their pride and satisfaction in their agricultural production:

> I enjoy working with stock and having a line of cattle to be proud of … I like … working with good cattle in good yards, erecting a new fence, getting weeds under control or eradicated (Beth, 50s, grazier).

> What you get your fulfilment out of: watching the grain flow out of the auger into the truck and think – we've really pulled that crop off, we've made some good decisions and that's a good crop (Felicity, 30s, producer).

Interview participants made clear the ways in which their agency could be exercised within old and newer prevailing discourses. In Section 5, we propose that the resilience and empowerment measures employed by the women are a form of agrarian pragmatics, utilising and actively contributing to shifts in discourse, with the goal of promoting their own wellbeing.

5. Discussion

5.1. Agrarian pragmatics: intersecting discourses and points of resistance

We have discussed in Sections 2 and 4 the prevailing discourses in the life worlds of women in this study, and the acculturation that both enables and constrains women. These discourses are imprinted on new young wives when they enter the farm family, through processes of acculturation (Berry, 2005; Paloma et al., 2010; van der Zee and van Oudenhoven, 2022) and interpellation (McInnerney, 2023; Bunch, 2013; Butler, 1993; Harding et al., 2014), the latter seen in the presumptive application of roles and duties generally regarded as befitting farming wives. For example, as discussed above, in-laws and community mores influence the kind of behaviours that are considered acceptable, such as appropriate friendships and socialising without husbands. It was clear in the interviews that farm wives were to be acquiescent and not ask too many questions. Apart from processes of acculturation however,

we can see that there are particular confluences of power – family patriarchies and neoliberal governments and economies – that intersect and create new stresses on old systems, where new opportunities might arise for those traditionally less powerful. We have seen for example that the demands of the neoliberal 'farm-as-business' requires new skills to make inherited farm operations financially viable and meet other more recent demands for sustainability. We have seen that patrilineal succession is increasingly less acceptable as more mothers and daughters take up roles – and commitments – essential to the success and continued operation of the farm. These confluences of power – and cedings of power – are eddies or points of acceptance and resistance where power might be redirected, change course.

Foucault notes that 'the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated' (Foucault, 1978: 62). The gendered nature of farm ownership, management, labour and succession, not only represents obstacles but also makes possible the articulation – the formulation – of alternatives. As Foucault (1978: 96) also notes, power relationships depend not only on power, and the benefits this power distributes to people, but its 'irreducible opposite,' constituted by multiple points of resistance

> … distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior.

It is the clear terms of masculine hegemony in the farm sector that allow women to see what needs to be accepted and what, on the other hand, needs to be resisted, and how, so that they might realize the agrarian ideal for themselves and their families, including their daughters. The women in this study employed strategies of both resilience and, more circumspectly, resistance, or empowerment, a pragmatics that enabled them to realize the life-ways they desired and hence their wellbeing.

The ultimate goal for the women was growing and protecting the family farm unit, as the entity of highest value, and if possible, transferring the farm itself, or another similar agricultural property, down through the generations. This focus, the over-arching source of wellbeing for the women, is also a point of convergence for the dominant discourses in their lives. The neoliberal farm that must maximise productivity and efficiency with less and less government support, the patriarchy that interpellates men as farmers and women as farmers' wives, contribute to, yet simultaneously undermine the imperative to maintain agrarian values and lifestyle. As we noted, this entanglement is not just in women's life worlds but in men's: women's desire to fully participate in, and contribute to, farm life, coupled with the demands of farm-as-business, finds a point of resistance to masculine hegemony in men's commitment to the farm and its needs. As noted in Section 1, family farm units are very dependent on the participation of women, not just as supportive farm wives, but as fully engaged management partners, and flexible off-farm sources of cash income (Pomeroy, 2015). In their interviews, the women involved in this research revealed a shift in roles across generations. We noted in Section 4.1 that the women under 60 are, where possible, including their daughters and daughters-in-law in farm activities and succession planning. Moreover, farming as a business has provided those younger women who have skills and previous careers, an entry into decision-making.

Resilience measures were employed by the women in the study in the face of risk: the threats of loss of an idealised agrarian place and lifestyle, including ejection from the possibility of succession, or 'excommunication' as Abbie (40s, producer) described it; loss of emotional or financial security derived from the farm; and the possibility of social rejection and exclusion within the farm and the farm community. Resilience measures included participating in farm support and relationship building within the farm family while watching for empowerment opportunities, drawing on the beauty of their environment for solace; socialising with other women to lift spirits and talk about the emotions experienced due to drought; organising community events and smaller social events; monitoring their husbands to ensure that they were coping and similarly for their neighbours. Additionally, many of the women undertook off-farm work to financially support the family and the farm business.

Empowerment on the other hand has been defined (Brodsky and Cattaneo, 2013: 336) as a positive shift in influence between a person and another person, or a person in a situation of social relations or in interactions with a system.

It is clear from the interviews that after trigger points are experienced by some of the participants, actions that might appear as subservient or acceptance of their secondary roles as described in the literature (Cassidy, 2019; Chiswell, 2016; Luhrs, 2016; Teather, 1996) are often manifestations of strategic withdrawal. Such withdrawal only continues until the risks of expulsion or rejection or financial loss are lessened, and an opportunity to progress arises or is created. At such opportunity points, participants who may have appeared acquiescent, move into empowering actions and are able to enact decision-making roles which bring them closer to their wellbeing goals. Examples include daughters-in-law establishing independent housing for their families (rather than living in housing controlled by their in-laws), establishing their own businesses or securing satisfying and independent off-farm work and negotiating succession processes.

Conversely, some of the participants who did not retreat at appropriate times, or appeared to be challenging, suffered severe consequences, including 'ousting' or 'ex-communication.' Several of the study participants who asked questions were subsequently excluded from all discussions of farm business and especially succession. Abbie (40s, producer) and her husband were asked to move into town and were not included in planning discussions: "Really, we did get ex-communicated … because yes, I suppose I was going against the grain and asking a lot of questions'. In the end, Abbie and her husband were forced out of his family farm altogether. Cautionary tales of young couples losing access to the farm were imparted by participants in their discussions with McInnerney, lending weight to strategies of quiet resilience until the timing is auspicious.

However, if young women can successfully navigate these difficult emotional and financial challenges, the resilience and empowerment measures taken when facing the earlier hurdles, such as acceptance into the husband's family and succession, serve them well for other later adversities such as dealing with droughts, banks, and other external threats. Slow changes in old power relations, those that supported older discourses of gendered labour, and farming as identity-for-life rather than business, could be leveraged by women to enhance their power as essential contributors to the farm, with a life interest in ownership and succession.

The discourses strongly affecting women on family farms today arise from historical societal forces and governmental agendas, such as nation building, food security and drives for larger export earnings. The women accept and resist these narratives, contribute to them and simultaneously reject them in a Foucauldian web of constant, often unconscious, power negotiations. A potential contribution of the analysis in this paper is to inform other emerging discourses that did not figure significantly in the discussions with the participants in this study but may have current and future implications for farm families. These include contemporary conversations about 'future directions for Australian land-use and sustainability' (Bryan et al., 2016: 146), social licence for farm ownership (Beban et al., 2024), including the competing claims of family farms versus corporate farming (Nuthall and Old, 2017), critical agrarianism (Carlisle, 2014; McBride III, 2023) and the Indigenous food sovereignty movement (Abdul et al., 2024; Grey and Patel, 2015).

The findings in this study on the agrarian ideals of women in family farming in large broadacre farms in South West Queensland contribute to these current conversations. Understanding the ways that these women are creating new narratives for themselves through

empowerment and resilience, also opens up new possibilities for policy-makers and practitioners to support farming families to balance competing demands on the land, especially and most urgently for environmental sustainability.

6. Conclusion: potential wider applications of this research

On the family farm today, the weight of masculine hegemony converges with the stress of neoliberalism's demands and its concomitant removal of supports, to greatly strain existing networks of power. Those hitherto disempowered can leverage such points of strain to reconfigure and negotiate the power networks. For women on farms, it is an opportunity to push through and acquire new power in roles that make the family farm viable, a pragmatics that ensures an agrarian lifestyle and hence wellbeing into the future.

We have also framed these discursive identities and power shifts within critiques offered by critical agrarianism. This is a philosophical and political approach that, while more radical and decolonizing than the agrarianism generally prevailing in the Australian farm sector, nonetheless enables us to see the ideals of women on family farms as part of an evolving contemporary agrarianism; it encompasses not only traditional farm values and lifestyle, but seeks gender equity and good farm custodianship.

There has been a call for more research into farm family dynamics and how best to engage the sector in land management practices for achieving net zero emissions (Gosnell et al., 2019; Hinkson, 2022). Our paper brings new knowledge and critique of farm family goals and discursive identities to discussions of land use and management and policy setting. It also suggests that the ideal of agrarianism in Australia has not faded, but will continue to evolve in response to social and environmental change.

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Marlyn McInnerney: Writing – original draft. **Jane Palmer:** Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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