

Succession planning and temporality: The influence of the past and the future

Fiona Gill

University of Sydney, Australia

Time & Society

22(1) 76–91

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0961463X10380023

tas.sagepub.com



Abstract

Although succession planning has been a fertile topic of investigation among rural sociologists, its temporal elements have been neglected. This has resulted in static analyses, with little attention paid to the influences of the past and future on present decision-making. This article introduces a consideration of temporality, examining the influences of past and future on the development and expression of farming identities. I argue that temporality plays a critical role as farmers struggle with conflicting senses of time and responsibilities to different generations.

Keywords

Temporality, succession, farming, identity, modernity

Introduction

The term 'succession' refers to the process by which family properties, in this instance, family farms, are passed from one generation to the next. This process is legally complex and emotionally fraught, and is a significant aspect of farm management and future planning. The successful transition of property between generations within the family ensures continuity for both family on the farm and the community in which the farm is located. As a result, it has been relatively well-documented in the literature dealing with rural and regional studies. However, the temporal elements of this process have been hitherto neglected. Specifically, this process provides an

Corresponding author:

Fiona Gill, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, R.C. Mills Building (A26), University of Sydney, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia.

Email: fiona.gill@sydney.edu.au

opportunity to examine the relationship between individuals, their perceived position in history, and their relationship to the future. This article argues that the negotiation of succession on family farms is a powerful attempt by individuals and families to control the shape of the future. Recognition of this involves the acknowledgement of an underexplored aspect of succession—the tension inherent in the relationship between the act of making a definite statement about the shape of the future, which in itself reflects a desire to control the future by means of appointing a successor, and the future's inherent recalcitrance and resistance to control. Further, the act of appointing a successor and working through the succession process necessitates individuals and families interacting with their family's pasts and how they relate to previous generations. Succession, then, is a complicated temporal process, involving as it does the simultaneous consideration of past, present and future.

This article examines how succession planning articulates perceptions of the future in relation to the past. In so doing, I consider how temporal elements shape an individual's sense of self, and what impact this has on their decision-making. In particular, this article argues that farmers are caught between their responsibilities to the past and to the future—decisions about the future are made through the farmer's understanding of the past and where they fit into the historical and social fabric of their community and farm. Using a case study of three dairy farms in New South Wales, Australia, I examine the motivations driving farmers to make specific decisions about the future of their farms in an industry and community undergoing great changes. By positioning farmers temporally, we are able to examine how the demands of the past, the realities of the present and the uncertainty of the future are articulated through decisions made which shape the future of the farm. Succession is therefore understood as a response to uncertainty, and highlights the fact that such decisions are not made rationally or objectively. Rather, every decision regarding succession is made within a web of competing responsibilities: the past, and the strong historical connection a family may have to the land; the present, in which environmental, social and economic pressures are making the very practice of farming increasingly difficult; and the future, with its inherent uncertainty.

This research is based on three family dairy farms in an area called 'Belsize', in New South Wales, Australia. These farms were chosen as all three had been in the same families for a least four generations, giving a strong sense of continuity and sense of 'place' within the community. Further, all three had survived a prolonged period of drought, in addition to extensive industry restructuring. Finally, the three represented three different 'classes' of farm, from original landholders, inherited wealth and

farm labourers who worked both on their own farm and on the others. Despite the apparent and perceived differences in their relative status' within the district, all three families revealed significant similarities in terms of their attitudes towards time and their experiences of succession planning. Over fifteen months in 2006 and 2007 I conducted three interviews each with ten adult members of the families as part of a research project examining the situation of family dairy farming in a deregulated context. This use of repeated qualitative interviews is relatively under-utilized in studies of family farming (Morris and Evans 2004: 104) despite the fact that this method moves away from the 'snap-shot' of life on the farm provided by the use of standardized or semi-structured interviewing, and instead provides data which reflects how families and farms change over time, facilitating the development of a more complete understanding of the farm as a whole (Price and Evans, 2006). By interviewing all adult members of a farming family, the complex managerial and social structures of many family farms in Australia are revealed as lived experiences. In examining the attitudes of different generations at the same moment in time, the impact of the past and history on each successive generation becomes clear. Of particular interest was the information gathered regarding uncertainty over the shape of the future. All family members felt a responsibility for making a decision now which would fundamentally affect future generations.

All three farms are grappling with issues of succession, relating to familial issues, in terms of who will inherit the farm; the environmental hardships associated with farming, including drought and urban encroachment; and economic issues, made manifest in the dairy industry by deregulation. In two cases, the Harris' and the Evans', the current farmers, Anthony Harris and David Evans are in their mid-fifties and manage the farms with their fathers. Their families are debating what shape the future will take for their children and for the farm. Both families of long-standing within their communities, they feel a responsibility to their forebears, the land and the community as a whole, as well as a need to ensure the best possible future for their children. The question of whether farming itself continues to be a viable option is weighed alongside the more difficult question of whether any child does, in fact, want the farm. The third family, the Lockhart's, is currently embroiled in a succession negotiation. The current farmer, Stephen, in his forties, manages the farm, but has not been appointed successor. As a result, it is not clear whether he will be able to continue farming after his father dies, or if the land will be split among his siblings and sold off. Questions arise here as to whether he should continue to farm, or if he should leave the farm now and find another job.

Both of these situations are examples of different experiences of temporality. For the Harris' and the Evans', the question is whether or not to

move forward towards a future. The farmers themselves are looking forward. In the Lockhart's situation, a temporal vacuum appears to exist. There is no sense of forward momentum, and the immediate future is very unclear. As a result, there is no sense at all of a long-term future, and uncertainty abounds.

This article will tease out some of these issues using temporality and perspectives of time and history as the analytical lens. A brief discussion of the nature of succession in the Australian context is followed by an examination of the nature of temporality, and specifically the influence of the past, present and future in the process of succession planning. The role and positioning of the self within this temporal context becomes vitally important as we consider the ways farmers attempt to control both the future and the affects of the past in a difficult present. Finally, we examine more closely the relationship between the past and present with the future in an attempt to fully understand the role of temporality in the process of succession planning.

Succession in agriculture

Succession refers to the process by which the ownership and management of the family farm is passed from one generation to another. Farming has several structural features which set it apart from other occupations, and make succession planning an emotionally and legally complex process. This section provides an overview of the unique nature of farming, leading into a discussion of the process of succession planning in farming families. This introduces the element of time, and particularly the positioning of the individual in relation to the future, to the article.

As noted above, farming possesses several structural features which render succession planning potentially problematic. Farming is simultaneously a business and livelihood, meaning that each farm is an economic unit supporting two or three generations, and a way of life, with associated cultural and emotional values, norms, traditions, behaviours and ideologies (Gray and Lawrence, 2001: 72–73). This results in a web of economic and emotional tie obligations which pull farming families in different directions. Further, successful farming involves the possession of a set of transferable skills (such as the operation of machinery, animal husbandry and so on) and the application of these skills to a specific place, involving in-depth knowledge of a particular piece of land. Such knowledge is not easily transferable or learnable. It is soil-specific human capital (Laband and Lentz, 1983: 311). A farm is not simply a patch of dirt or a place, in the same way that a factory or other business is. Rather, a successful farm is the physical manifestation of generations of knowledge—knowledge developed and used

over time. Succession, then, is not merely a legal transaction, but is also a process by which the incumbent farmer becomes the guardian of this accumulated knowledge, which ties the farmer emotionally and historically to the farm. This is best illustrated in the prevalence of traditional patterns of inheritance, where young farmers experienced a gradual progression from general labour as a child, to more complex tasks as they mature, finally taking over full management of the property (Foskey, 2005: 51; McAllister and Geno, 2004: 178). This 'apprenticeship' provides the opportunity for the exchange of knowledge, resulting in continuity. It also results in farmers experiencing strong ties to the past, and their lived experience which in turn guides their decisions regarding the future.

The importance of this process is reflected in studies of succession and inheritance patterns in agricultural communities, which have tended to emphasize the importance of family and occupational succession in farming compared to other types of family businesses (Foskey, 2005: 50). That is, farmers will tend to be (dominantly) sons of farmers and farms tend to stay in families. McAllister and Geno found that 98% of Australian farmers still operate family farms, with sole proprietorships or family partnerships, and familial labour forces (McAllister and Geno, 2004: 179). However, a trend is emerging which suggests that intergenerational succession within families is declining. A recent study of Australian farmers found that the majority of farmers were still farming the land previously farmed by older generations in their family (57%), but between 1991 and 2000, this percentage had declined by 4%, echoing trends in the United Kingdom (Foskey, 2005: 53).

In the Australian agricultural context, this decline can be traced to significant changes in the wider economic and environmental context. Dairying in particular has been shaped in recent years by the twin forces of severe and prolonged drought and deregulation. It is estimated that the number of farmers will decline by between 30 and 50% between 1996 and 2021, with only 100,000 Australians describing farming as their main occupation by 2021 (Foskey, 2005: 50). In the dairy industry over the past two decades, there has been a sharp decline in numbers—from 22,000 in 1980 to less than 9000 in 2006. In NSW, the number of farms has dropped by two thirds, from 3601 to 1024.

Since 1991, eastern Australia has been in almost continuous drought, affecting over 80% of Australia's dairy farms, and devastating NSW and Queensland dairy industries. Simultaneously, the dairy industry underwent the process of deregulation, a term referring to the removal of both state and federal legislation specific to the dairy industry. In broad terms, this has forced farmers to significantly expand their operations, seeking more efficient and rationalized operating systems (Dibden and Cocklin, 2005).

The combined pressures of a need to rationalize production, along with the problems associated with drought have resulted in a number of farmers leaving the industry in government supported schemes (Higgins, 2001). Still others have gone heavily into debt in order to maintain their farm's viability. The process through which such decisions are articulated and debated is succession planning, and attempting to answer the question of whether a viable future for the farm actually exists.

Changes in the ways that succession is being managed are being observed, which may in part be due to the very uncertainty surrounding the future. In particular, children of farmers are being encouraged to move away from the 'apprenticeship' model, and to actively seek out different fields of employment. If these children do return to the farm, it will be to inherit a changed business, without the long-term handover process. Moreover, it is by no means clear that the next generation has anything to return to:

(If) he wanted to get a trade, there are no qualms with that. But I think as far as working here, it's not an option. (Stephen Lockhart speaking about his son)

Gareth's ... he's in the advertising industry now. I just given them the choice. So ... I don't know they'll come back, but they will own the place and they will presumably keep it. ... Bethany ... well she's not interested in the farm at all. ... I think the best thing for her is just money, so we'll cash her up, against a whole lot of shares ... just make sure she's cashed up, yeah. It's worked quite well. ... It's far more versatile that way than giving her a chunk of land that she would then feel guilty about selling. (David Evans on his sons and daughter)

Well I don't think there's a future for this farm long term and the girls have never shown any inclination. ... (T)hey've never shown any inclination and I suppose our view has been to get everyone educated and independent and then if they sort of say well, if they're interested well we'll think about it. But I think we'd have to move to have a long term sort of future in that ... (T)he notion of saying, well Hugh in particular that there's a career here in 20 years' time, I can't see it. (Anthony Harris)

If the next generation are being encouraged away from the farm, the future of the farm is thrown into doubt. We can see that all three farmers are reluctant to plan too far into the future—a very different situation to that faced by their fathers. Where previously, succession planning and disputes took place over which child was to actually inherit the farm, today's

debates are over whether there is a future in which to continue to farm at all. Further, uncertainty over the viability of the farm in the future results in individuals experiencing something of a temporal vacuum. With no clear future, the present and the past, and the place of the individual, are thrown into doubt.

Temporal considerations—past, present and future in decision-making

The nature of temporality, and the importance of time, is rarely analysed systematically in the sociological literature relating to farming generally, and succession in particular. This is a significant omission because decisions regarding succession involve consideration of the future and the past, and the place occupied by the individual in the passage of time. When making decisions about succession, farmers must decide when to pass the reins of control over, what future they are imposing on their children, and are making these decisions in a present which is undergoing rapid change. The absence of time as a specific focus for analysis in rural sociological literature also reflects its absence in the broader sociological literature dealing with human relationships, communities and identities.

This absence is noteworthy, as without a sense of the passage of time, and the temporal position of the object of study, analyses are necessarily inert (Howard and Hollander, 1993: 426). Crowe and Allan note that in the analysis of community life, 'the neglect of community time reproduces static typologies which fail to capture the dynamic nature of community formation and development'. (Crowe and Allan, 1995: 147) Such a statement holds true for the analysis of most social interactions. Relationships exist within and through time, and their nature changes—that is, social relations are dynamic, and this dynamism is provided by their temporal nature. This is particularly true when we consider contexts which are undergoing, or have undergone, substantial change. In such contexts, individuals' and communities' relationships to their pasts and futures become ambiguous, and questions arise as to the place of the individual in relation to their past and future.

The importance of time, and specifically the importance of the past and the future in determining the shape and direction of present activities, was perhaps most strongly articulated by Mead (Howard and Hollander, 1993: 427; Strauss, 1991: 413) Maines, Sugrue and Katovich's analysis of Mead's work reveals an on-going concern with time as an important variable in the analysis of society. In his analysis, the past and the future exist only in relation to the present because we live and act in the present. Thus, the past is understood through the present, and the future projected from

the present perspective. But because the future is never realized, and the past exists on in memory, both form referents for the creation of meaning in the present (Maines et al., 1983: 162).

Although we might argue that this holds true in all human societies, the specific conception and experience of time varies widely between different cultures and societies, and within one society, different temporalities may exist simultaneously. This is the case for farmers, who are often understood as experiencing time cyclically, or seasonally, reflecting a life bound by the daily and seasonal tasks associated with farming. Each season brings with it different tasks, but these are repeated year after year, generation after generation. Further, each day follows a similar pattern (Persoon and Est, 2000). This is contrasted with 'modern' conceptions of temporality, wherein the past is abolished, movement irreversible, and passage through time represents progress rather than repetition (Latour, 1993: 69). The straddling of these temporalities is necessary as farmers attempt to make decisions regarding the future. The power of the cyclical model is felt when farmers reflect on their place within the family and the place of the family in history, yet the linear, modern tug of the future is sensed when farmers reflect on their present circumstances. Farmers straddle different temporalities and attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands of each (Lockie, 2006). Signs of this struggle are clear in the encouragement of farming children away from the farms. Opening up the possibility of a different type of life has also involved the immersion of children in a future-oriented, linear temporality. But this seems to have resulted in a loss of identity on the part of some of the farmers. Identifying themselves strongly with both past and future generations, the apparent loss of the future, as observed by the farmers in this case-study, has had a negative impact on their own sense of self. This impact of temporality on self will be discussed below.

The self, the past and succession decisions

Busch argues that the finite span of human life means that 'we are always under pressure to complete our life's tasks, whether trivial or profound'. (Busch, 1989: 8) Our foreknowledge of our limited lifespan, and our sense of our responsibilities towards others requires us to order our activities and to prioritize. The pressure experienced to 'finish' all that needs to be done indicates that our sense of ourselves is bound up by our sense of what we have inherited, and what we will leave behind. When attempting to prioritize our tasks, we are informed by our context. Our knowledge is generated

by our experiences of a society which pre-existed us, and which we continue beyond our experience:

Simply put, we are all born into a world that was here before we arrived and will be here after we die. Paradoxically, it is not a world of our making though we participate in making it what it is. In short, we are always born into a tradition, and even our rejection of it signifies its important power over us. These traditions are sources of values for us. They tell us what is good and what is bad, what is true and what is false, what is beautiful and what is ugly. (Busch, 1989: 8)

Temporality, then, imposes on our sense of selves by providing us with a context in which to operate, and by giving us a set of rules to live by. The present is then informed by the past, and the future shaped by our actions in the present. In this way, the past lingers within the present and future, and shapes our sense of who we are and how we should behave.

In some 'past-oriented' societies, the past, or 'lifestyle of the ancestors' provides the orientation for present and future actions (Persoon and Est, 2000: 11). All times are conceived as existing simultaneously, and the actions and decisions of today are made in consideration of what has happened in the past and what will happen in the future. These decisions are made through reference to past and future generations, and the relationship that the present generation has with them:

Predecessors, having already lived, can be known or, more accurately, known about, and their accomplished acts can have an influence upon the lives for whom they are predecessors (that is, their successors), though the reverse is, in the nature of the case, not possible. Successors, on the other hand, cannot be known, or even known about, for they are the unborn occupants of an unarrived future; and though their lives can be influenced by the accomplished acts of those whose successors they are (that is, their predecessors), the reverse is again not possible. (Geertz, 1973: 366)

Geertz argues that all generations of a family are interdependent, although the interdependence, and therefore the responsibility, runs in one direction only—from past to future. The present is determined by the ancestors—it is therefore dependent on the past for its existence, and has a responsibility to preserve what has been inherited. On the other hand, the present must in turn give future generations their legacy. Acknowledgement of this situation results in a two-fold responsibility or debt—the present looks both forward and back in making decisions. This is reflected in the

decision-making processes of farmers surrounding succession—a process which occupies much of their working lives.

Farmers tend to be either working towards succession themselves (that is, working towards succeeding their fathers), or working to consolidate the inheritance for the next generation. The present, and their own lives, is therefore dominated by the past and the future. This is reflected in the experiences of farmers who are connected historically and socially to a particular farm, and who must take responsibility for the future of that farm:

(W)e are fifth generation, but all the others are older than that. They're either seven or eighth generation ... and I think they just don't want to be the member of the family that ... the generation that sells out, and I'm the same, don't want to be the one that sells out. (David Evans)

(Y)ou know, certainly my long-term goal is to make sure that this back half which is the original ground, remains. So I see that as my ... my obligation to history if you like, and that'd still be nearly 300 acres. (Chris Harris)

We can see a strong connection to past and future generations which informs the identity, and performance of self, of these farmers. The responsibility felt by these farmers may be understood as a desire to pass on to the future what was left to them by the past. In this sense, these men act as guardians or custodians of the land, rather than owners or businessmen. There is a clear recognition of the cyclical nature of inheritance and farming. These farmers have their farms because of the actions of their ancestors. They therefore have a responsibility to live up to this legacy and pass it on to their successors. Given the centrality of place for farmers—the farm as a physical manifestation of knowledge and history—individuals can only identify themselves through a relationship with past and future occupiers of place. The present, then, is contingent and temporary, and individuals are not important except as placeholders in the passage of time.

It is this double responsibility, to past and future, which determines the identities of these farmers. Their relationship to past and future generations gives their lives and actions meaning, defining who they are and what they do. This, of course, depends on the future generations accepting and valuing the legacy of the past. Without a clear sense of the future, meaning is lost as the flow from past to future is disrupted. Katherine Evans, the wife of one of the farmers, has watched her husband and others of his generation, wrestle with this issue, and comments that: 'I suppose they do think about it because they feel that they've worked very hard to develop a future and if that's all been for nothing, then what has life been for?'

This lies at the heart of succession decisions. The future, represented by the children, is held hostage by the present, and by the expectations and work of the past. Given this fact, decisions regarding succession take on an added importance. Being able to successfully transfer the past of the family to future generations is an important marker of identity. Without it, an individual's identity is potentially undermined.

In contrast to the twinned orientation, to past and future, of temporality outlined above, the linear model of temporality sits uneasily. Yet this linear model represents the economic and environmental model of temporality within which farmers operate in the wider social context. Specifically, a conflict arises between the temporality outlined above and the ways in which temporality is understood, organized and rationalized in western societies. This linear understanding sees the future as obliterating the past, such that 'the moderns... sense time as an irreversible arrow, as capitalization, as progress' (Latour, 1993: 69). Persoon argues that, as a result, the future: 'is used as a resource: it is calculated, insured, predicted, colonized and discounted. It is... dealt with and eliminated in the present...' (Persoon and Est, 2000: 12).

The future can and should be controlled now. It is not for future generations to manage, but for the present to manage for them. This is a very different construction of the future. Where previously, the present had a responsibility to the future and to future generations, to preserve what exists in the present, now the present can determine the future and control it from the present. The responsibility does not necessarily lie in preserving something for future generations, but rather in shaping the future by decisions made in the present. This perception of the future and temporality is experienced by individuals, not in their daily lives, but rather through their interactions with larger organizations and institutions.

Farmers experience this directly in their engagement with the process of succession planning. Their business is now oriented in a linear temporality imposed by a deregulated, rationalized industry. Further, their successors have been encouraged to engage in the future-oriented society at the expense of the more cyclical temporal flow of farming life. The next generation of farmers, then, see time, and their opportunities, as being based away from the farm, in industries and occupations which are more linear. Farmers' children are increasingly seeing their future as one embedded in larger institutions and economic networks:

I think he sees how hard his father works and seeing that he's not getting anything out of it. I think that that's what he sees so ... but he's studying agriculture and primary industries, and I mean his idea is to get into

agribusiness and he's doing business studies. So ... he wants to get into it somehow but I don't think he wants to do the dairy really ... (Elizabeth Lockhart)

This represents a different understanding of the future. Agriculture and dairying remain important, but the future is looking away from the past, effectively destroying it, by moving outside the family web. The future's orientation is outwards and forwards, breaking the cycle of past-present-future which has dominated farming until now.

Such a dynamic adds a wrinkle to discussions regarding succession. Succession is less about ensuring a livelihood per se, for future generations, than it is about the emotional connection to place, and the sense that the land itself needs to be kept within the family. That is, in succession planning, farming may be less about practice and more about completeness—a family's legacy lies in their connection to a place through time:

I said to them, I don't really care what level of how many hours a week they put into farming, it doesn't matter, they can just own the land ... So they can put a share farmer on ... or lease it, or put a manager on it ... And the kids can be here full time or one hour a week, or cruise out on the weekends. I just think they'd be silly to sell it. (David Evans)

I don't think the future in this farm is dairying but don't see any reason that it can't be any other myriad of whatever's going to be out there in 10–15 years' time ... (If they're of the right mindset there are plenty of things you can do even if we sell some of the front of the farm eventually ... (Chris Harris)

In terms of farming succession, the ability to successfully transfer to farm intact to future generations acts as a strong assertion of self. A sense of the need to affirm one's place in history, as an intrinsic part of one's self, is evident in the desire and need, expressed by the farmers to keep the farm for their children. It is also important to note that this does not necessarily imply the continuation of farming as an occupation. That is, place remains important and the transfer of place has become central, rather than the transfer of knowledge. This implies that the meaning of farming and the farm itself may be changing. As succession becomes less about an occupation and more a statement about the position of a family and the place of the individual in the history of that family.

As we have seen, this is not an unproblematic situation, as it involves binding the next generation to the past, and the farm, in a context where the future is very uncertain. Farmers are reluctant, in some senses, to think about succession in part because it forces a confrontation between their

commitment to history and their desire to ensure the best possible future for their children. But further, this desire and expression of self is based on a specific understanding of time and experience of temporality. The present generation's identity and temporality has been based in the cyclical model of time, and their sense of self within time has been informed by the recognition of a responsibility through time to other generations. The future generation, however, seems to have been encouraged to adopt an alternative temporality, which leads them away from responsibility to the past.

The resulting period of transition is one in which neither model of temporality is entirely adopted. Both the cyclical and linear models of temporality provide farmers with a sense of direction. Either they are moving towards a future defined by responsibility to past and present, or they are moving towards a future defined by a linear sense of progress. Without a decision being made about succession, the farmer is left without a direction or purpose. This conflict is best expressed by those farmers in flux, such as the Lockharts, who are working through a complex succession situation themselves. Stephen Lockhart clearly articulates the conflict he feels between past and future, a situation exacerbated by the uncertainty of his own present situation:

Dad desperately wants to try and make sure that the place stays ... but it's very difficult when you get something that's worth that sort of money and the others aren't, even though they're not contributing, they're feeling as though they're wanting to be treated equally. So that's going to cause a bit of pain. But that's not withstanding the pain that it causes me when things are just going along. So for reasons of planning and everything else, I just want to know and I guess it's part of a reaction to drought, isn't it? I got to know what the future holds ... the place has been in a state of flux basically since 1964 when dad not knowing what was going to happen when grandfather died and just sort of barely scraping through. Well I've had enough of that. I'd prefer to know and to make my own decisions

The position of the Lockharts is a more complicated, and more extreme, case of problems which arise from poor succession planning than other farms in this study. However, it does make clear the need to have a clear vision of the desired shape of the future. It also highlights the complex nature of temporality and lived experience in this context. Stephen is attempting to manage the impact of past poor planning, in which it is not clear who actually was to inherit the farm when his father took over, and the need to manage the current succession in a present where his father is almost incapacitated, but no succession plan has been put in place because of the unresolved issues from the previous generation. Finally, his need to arrange

and control a more secure future for his family rests on his being able to take over the farm from his father, a situation complicated by the needs and desires of his siblings. His children, as we have seen, are not necessarily interested in taking over the farm. Four generations, and three different succession plans are jumbled up in this situation. A further complication is that the present is difficult environmentally, meaning that the farm is barely viable. This has resulted in a strong need to control the shape of his future through the start of succession planning. Whatever else farmers can or cannot control, they can attempt to control who takes over.

A further interesting element is the need, strongly expressed, not to control the future specifically, but instead to have some mechanism for deciding how to move forward. In this instance, it is not clear whether Stephen feels a strong sense of responsibility to previous generations. It is also evident that this lack of relationship, the apparent breaking of the temporal and emotional chain, means that other options are open to Stephen in terms of his discharging his responsibilities towards the future. He is willing to leave the farm should that become necessary due to disputes over the will once his father dies, if he is not appointed successor. This would represent the embracing of a linear temporality, in which the past does not have a bearing on the shape and direction of the future. It is a choice which, given the declining farm numbers witnessed, seems to be made more and more often.

Temporality and succession

Although many of the issues associated with succession planning and inheritance in agriculture are well discussed elsewhere, this article has begun to tease out some of the temporal complexities associated with the process of succession. I have suggested that, when examining succession, researchers must be aware of the importance of time and the specific temporal context in which farmers find themselves. In particular, I argued that the present exists as a context in which past and future collide, and the place in which farmers must define for themselves their own motivations, their sense of self, and their responsibilities to the future.

The hold of the past over the present is clearly articulated throughout farming literature. The sense of responsibility felt by farmers for the legacy which they inherited is twinned with their understanding of their roles as stewards for the future. What they themselves inherited, they are holding in trust for future generations. This is complicated further by the personal ties between past and present relationships—emotional bonds between fathers and sons stretch between three generations, and result in succession planning becoming an emotional and subjective process, rather than simply a rational decision made in a vacuum.

Succession can be understood as an attempt to control the future. In willing farms onto the next generation, farmers are making a strong statement about their belief in the viability and worth of their way of life. However, it is becoming clear that farmers are no longer certain about making this kind of statement. Indeed, this article has made clear farmers' ambivalence about the shape of the future, and the desirability of passing a debt-ridden legacy to their children. This is further complicated by the fact that their children are growing up in a changing present—the context in which all of these decisions are made. Children are increasingly moving away from farming, becoming trained in alternative fields of employment. This is in part because of their parents' ambivalence, but it also reflects the specific difficulties of the present. The present, in this context, is probably the most important temporal period of all. Environmentally and economically, this is not straightforward. Children have witnessed their parents struggling in periods of prolonged drought and economic change. The three farms in this study have survived much of the change undergone recently, yet these experiences have shaped perspectives of both past and future.

This indicates that discussions of succession and the future of farming must take into account experiences of temporality and time. Although largely invisible in much of the sociological literature, it remains one of the most important aspects of daily life, and provides much needed movement in our analysis of society.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a generous grant from the University of Sydney Research and Development Scheme. Thanks to all of the respondents, my research assistants, Stephen Borthwick and Lucy Inglis for tireless literature searches, and to the reviewers for the timely and helpful suggestions.

References

- Busch L (1989) Irony, Tragedy, and Temporality in Agricultural Systems, or, How Values and Systems are Related. *Agriculture and human Values* Fall, 4–11.
- Crowe GP and Allan G (1995) Community Types, Community Typologies and Community Time. *Time & Society* 42(2): 147–166.
- Dibden J and Cocklin C (2005) Sustainability and agri-environmental governance. In: Vaughan Higgins and Geoffrey Lawrence (eds) *Agricultural Governance: Globalization and the new politics of regulation*. London: Routledge, 135–152.
- Foskey R (2005) *Older Farmers and Retirement: A Report for the Rural Industries and Development Corporation*. Kingston: RIRDC.

- Geertz C (1973) Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali. In: Clifford Geertz (ed.) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, 2000 edn. New York: Basic Books, 360–411.
- Gray I and Lawrence G (2001) *A Future for Regional Australia: Escaping Global Misfortune*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Higgins V (2001) Calculating climate: ‘advanced liberalism’ and the governing of risk in Australia drought policy. *Journal of Sociology* 37(3): 299–316.
- Howard JA and Hollander JA (1993) Marking Time. *Sociological Inquiry* 63(4): 425–443.
- Laband DN and Lentz BF (1983) Occupational Inheritance in Agriculture. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 36: 311–314.
- Latour B (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Lockie S (2006) Networks and Agri-Environmental Action: Temporality, Spatiality and Identity in Agricultural Environments. *Sociologia Ruralis* 46(1): 22–39.
- Maines DR, Sugrue NM and Katovich MA (1983) The Sociological Import of G.H. Mead’s Theory of the Past. *American Sociological Review* 48(2): 161–173.
- McAllister J and Geno B (2004) Australian Farm Inheritance—New Patterns of Legal Structure in Property Rights and Landholding. *Rural Society* 12(2): 178–192.
- Morris C and Evans N (2004) Agricultural turns, geographical turns: retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Rural Studies* 20(1): 95–111.
- Persoon GA and Est DME van (2000) The study of the future in anthropology in relation to the sustainability debate. *Focaal* 35: 7–28.
- Price L and Evans N (2006) From ‘As Good as Gold’ to ‘Gold Diggers’: Farming Women and the Survival of British Family Farming. *Sociologia Ruralis* 46(4): 280–298.
- Strauss A (1991) Mead’s Multiple Conceptions of Time and Evolution: The Contexts and Their Consequences for Theory. *International Sociology* 6(4): 411–426.