

Chapter 1: Introduction

I've never not worked; never ever in my life have I not worked. So I don't know anything but work. I've always been a busy person, not only active in my work life, but also in the community. Even now in my 80s I just keep rolling (Henry, Interview 2, p. 3).

This short extract alludes to the inspiration behind the study described in this thesis. What is the experience of retirement for rural men who, anecdotally, "don't know anything but work"? As an occupational therapist and occupational scientist, I was driven to understand this experience for older rural men from an occupational perspective.

On a more personal note, my upbringing on a wheat and sheep farm in North-West Victoria established my passion for rural issues from a young age. My experiences of sitting alongside Pop or Dad in the ute marking lambs, long days picking up fleeces and sweeping in the shearing shed provided me with countless opportunities to observe and be part of rural working life. Having watched my Pop's experience of forced retirement due to his declining health and the retirement of many other rural men in subsequent years, I have been fascinated by the unique nature of this experience for rural men.

In contrast to their urban counterparts, there seems to be a disparity between retirement as a predictable change for most people in the Western world (Jonsson, Borell & Sadlo, 2000) and rural men's desire to work and to fulfil the desirable role of the self-sufficient and robust working man (Gattuso & Saw, 1998). Other studies have explored the experience of moving from full-time work into a daily life where work no longer

dominates, usually with reference to retirement from 'organisations' and 'companies', concepts not relevant to rural men who live and work in the same place.

Why rural men?

Although my rural background created my initial interest in this topic, rural men were chosen as the focus population of this study for several different reasons. Of great concern are statistics that report that 50% of older rural-living adults have one symptom of depression and consume more alcohol than their urban-dwelling counterparts. Furthermore, the suicide rate for older rural men aged 70 to 79 years is the highest in the male population (ABS, 1994). Perceptions of rural masculinity have been linked to the poor health of rural men, in which case their reluctance to address social and emotional issues has been attributed to their need to be seen as 'hardy' and 'robust' (Little & Jones, 2000; McMurray, 1994; Saugeres, 2002).

The current rural climate has certainly pushed issues concerning rural dwellers to the fore as Australia experiences the worst recorded drought in its history (Burgess, 2006). Among many concerns, reduced equity in pastoral and agricultural assets has meant families are less likely to pass the farm down to the next generation (Alston & Kent, 2004), therefore stalling retirement for older rural men.

Regardless of the current rural climate, the rural environment itself is yet to be explored comprehensively as a unique occupational context within which the rural man evolves as an occupational being.

Research to date concerning rural men has primarily focused on perceptions of rural masculinity, primary health care issues such as access to health care professionals, and more recently, the increasingly alarming rates of suicide and depression amongst this population. As an occupational therapist and occupational scientist, as well as a farmer's daughter, I was motivated to take a unique approach to better understand this population through focusing on the occupational transition of retirement.

Why retirement?

Life changes such as retirement can be viewed as opportunities to better understand how the form, function and meaning of occupations and perceptions of identity change as people make the transition from one occupational pattern to another (Jonsson et al., 2000). The experience of *rural* retirement for men was of particular interest to me as a researcher and an occupational therapist, and the paucity of studies on this experience exposed a gap in the literature and current occupational therapy practice.

A theoretically-driven exploration of the experience of retirement for rural men was necessary and I believed that occupational science had much to offer as a philosophical basis for understanding this occupational transition. The complex and multi-faceted nature of the retirement experience for rural men was anticipated for several reasons, including consideration of many factors specific to the rural environment. Three such factors are: the economic viability for future generations, the current climate of widespread drought and the isolated nature of the rural 'workplace'.

From an occupational perspective I was interested in rural men's experience of growing older as they were presumably less able to physically interact with the environment and to enact their relationship with the land. With an understanding of the relationship between occupation and identity (Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004; Kielhofner, 2002; Maslow, 1968; Unruh, Versnel & Kerr, 2002), I was specifically interested in understanding the impact of growing older and retiring on the men's perceptions of their identity. I had anticipated that this relationship might be uniquely complex given rural ideals of the inextricable relationship between physical work and perceptions of identity for rural men (Saugeres, 2002; Johnson, 2001).

Why life history?

A life history research design was chosen as the primary methodology for this study with a phenomenological orientation incorporated to maintain the focus on the lived experience of the retirement transition. Life history as a research tool has the potential to elucidate the broader discourses that shape the social, cultural and historical dimensions of the environment in which each individual's life has unfolded over time, as well as to show the trajectory of the individual narrative. My first-hand experience of watching my Dad work with his father and more recently the interaction between Dad and my brother assured me that an understanding of each man's experiences over the lifespan was imperative to providing context for exploring the transition from work to retirement.

The utility of life history as a research design is evident in its capacity to illuminate the emergence and development of key constructs such as occupation and identity over

time. Identity formation has been defined as a process which gives meaning and continuity to individual experience (Eriksen, 1968). Accordingly, life histories provide rich narrative data which illuminate experiences of engagement in meaningful occupation over time, influenced by the specific occupational context.

The value of a life history is manifest in the enablement of a person to reflect on aspects of their life as a whole, rather than focusing on specific events or episodes. This allowed significant themes and motifs to emerge, enhancing insights of the men. This provided a cogent vehicle for reflection and understanding which they described as an essentially empowering process.

Introduction to the thesis

Following this introduction, chapter 2 provides an overview of the existing literature relevant to the topic of the study. This review illuminates the gap in existing literature and current practice which this study addresses. Furthermore, the presentation of literature firmly embeds this study within the realm of occupational science but also allows it to be informally influenced by perspectives on rural masculinity, rural health and ageing in place.

The methodology of the study is described in chapter 3, beginning with an outline of the purpose of this study. The major approaches informing the study and the theoretical perspectives which have influenced the interpretation of the data are introduced, and the processes of recruitment, sampling and data collection are clarified. The reflexive process of data analysis and interpretation is described and the authenticity and

limitations of the study are considered. The participants and the researcher are introduced at the conclusion of the chapter.

The findings of the study, accompanied by interpretive commentary of the researcher, are presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 4 focuses on the occupational and existential features of being a rural man. In keeping with life history research design, the men's stories remain intact and are presented individually as an abridged version of their life history. Each story is presented as an exemplar of a specific occupational construct as they are experienced by the men within the very specific historic and sociocultural context of rural Australia. In subsequent chapters *in vivo* language derived from the men's narratives is represented in italics in the first instance.

The analytical lens is narrowed to consider the experience of becoming an older rural man in chapter 5. The enormity of changing a whole way of life is a resoundingly strong theme. For the men, growing older involves a changing physical capacity and a changing performance of work occupations, indicative of the embodied relationship they share with their work, the land and their identity.

Chapter 6 reveals more specific findings relevant to the retirement experience and introduces strategies the men used to negotiate retirement, strategies which reflect the processes of occupational adaptation. Although occupational adaptation as a construct has been explored in occupational therapy for several decades, it has mostly been developed relative to special needs populations. This aspect of the findings represents a new focus on well populations and contextually-derived strategies the men employed to cope with normal developmental stages. The strategies described by the men range

from a denial of change circumstances to a carefully orchestrated tapering off of activities.

Following presentation of the narrative extracts and interpretive commentary, chapter 7 presents discussion of the findings and implications. The purpose of this chapter is to provide clarity and synthesis as a means of drawing together the entire study. Having presented the findings in terms of the various levels of interest in chapters 4, 5 and 6, the discussion is structured around five key propositions, grounded in narrative data, related to the rural man's experience of retirement.

The recommendations, based on the findings of the study, are presented in final chapter of this thesis. These recommendations are grouped according to discipline-related entities to maximise the efficacy of implementation. Recommendations specific to rural men as a population (and more broadly to rural health) are presented first, followed by those related to occupational therapy curricula and practice and occupational science.

My preparation of this thesis has adhered to American Psychological Association (APA), 5th edition (2001) instructions for manuscript preparation. The thesis format departs from these guidelines, however, as I have chosen to block justify the text rather than indent the first line of each paragraph. Block presentation of the text allows the indented narrative extracts to be best highlighted within the surrounding text.

**Rural men's retirement as an occupational
transition:
A life history study**

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