

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Leaving the land: An exploratory study of retirement for a small group of Australian men

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Retirement from paid work is a major life change for men and women. It has been suggested that, for men, self-identity is more strongly associated with paid work than is generally the case for women. If this is so, then the retirement transition for men, in which not only the behaviours of a lifetime but also the sense of self must be substantially recast, is of particular interest for the challenges it can present to their wellbeing. Research into male retirement has concentrated on the experiences of urban dwellers. Little is known of the retirement experiences of rural men and particularly of those who, after a life of farming and of close affiliation with the land, have moved from their farms in retirement. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to explore the retirement experiences of a small group of rural men who, in retirement, have left the land.

Methods: Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with seven men: all retired farmers from the New England area of New South Wales, Australia. All men had left their farms between 1.5 and 7.0 years prior to commencement of the study. All were married and living with their spouses, some of whom were present during the interviews. Data were analysed inductively to identify themes which characterise aspects of their retirement experiences.

Results: Three themes were identified addressing: (1) the meaning and significance of the land to these men, and the associated challenges in adjusting to retired life; (2) the significance of spouses, families and social contacts to the retirement experience; and (3) the role of hobbies or interests other than farming in making the transition to retirement. Farming and living on the land had been important to all of the men, some of whom found making a gradual transition from full-time farming aided their adjustment to retirement. Spouses played an important role in the decision to retire and most of the men reported that they accepted retirement for



the sake of their spouses. Those men who developed alternative hobbies or interests prior to, or post-retirement, and who maintained or developed social networks, reported satisfaction with the retirement experience.

Conclusions: The findings from this study reflect those from the literature regarding the importance for men of social interactions and having a sense of purpose in life after retirement. The results are similar to those for retired men in urban settings. However, the particular ramifications of retirement for rural men with a strong attachment to the land need to be considered for their potential health implications: an issue for further research.

Key words: activity, ageing, male, rural, social, transition.

Introduction

Retiring from paid work is a substantial life change which requires adjustment, the experience of which can include both positive and negative elements in accordance with personal and contextual factors¹⁻³. For men in particular, self-identity may be very strongly linked with paid occupation⁴. Although retirement might be eagerly anticipated as:

*...release from the tyranny of going to work, for many men the reality of retirement...can be very different. While some older men revel in the chance to explore new dimensions of life, others suffer the loss of self-esteem and sense of purpose in their lives as a consequence of their changed role in life and status in the community. They may find the adjustment very hard, feel lonely and isolated, missing the contact and camaraderie with other men associated with their work (p. i)*⁵.

Rural life presents unique features and special challenges for men's health and wellbeing. These are particularly apparent in times of substantial change, such as when they make the transition from working on the land to retirement. This article begins by examining issues of rural health, men and ageing, and retirement from the land to underpin a subsequent discussion of the methods and outcomes of an exploratory study into the retirement experiences of a cohort of rural men in New South Wales, Australia.

Rural health and gender issues

Compared with their urban counterparts, rural people experience poorer health. For example, they exhibit higher rates of accident, hospitalisation, mental illness and mortality⁶⁻⁸. Among Australian men, suicide rates for those living in rural areas are higher than for those in urban areas⁹.

On many health outcome measures, Australian men perform much more poorly than do women – such as lower life expectancy, increased cardiovascular mortality, higher rates of injury and suicide¹⁰. Compared with women, men are less likely to seek advice and assistance regarding their health¹¹. This has been attributed to the inadequacy of health services provision tailored to the issues and needs of men, and to a prevailing masculine culture in which men do not place the same priority on health maintenance and help-seeking as women do^{10,11}. Rural men face additional health disadvantages over urban men by virtue of their location, work and lifestyles - including access to preventative, early intervention and mental health services^{9,12}.

Men and retirement

Few studies have focussed on the health of older people in rural areas¹³ and, more particularly, on the health of rural men following retirement. Comparative studies of men and women have indicated there are gender differences in how they cope with ageing and retirement^{2,3}. Men have higher suicide rates than women across all age groups⁹ – but there is a marked peak in suicide rates among elderly men^{12,14}.



It has been suggested that, in general, men may be more career-focused than women and that men link their self identity more strongly with their paid occupation than do women⁴. For example, men who retired from 'high powered' company positions have described a feeling of 'nothingness' that caused disorientation and a loss of interest in living¹⁵. Among the experiences reported by men in relation to their retirement are the sense of 'slowing down', thinking about death, and losing friends¹⁶.

Rural retired men

While men, in general, may face difficulties in retirement, for those rural men whose 'sense of place' is anchored in a farming environment, the challenges to health and wellbeing may be greater. Sense of place refers to the symbolic meaning attributed to a place¹⁷; associated with an individual's sense of place are thoughts and feelings of attachment, satisfaction and identity which in turn help to create a sense of meaning associated with a place. Changes of place (or displacement) can impact profoundly on a person's health and wellbeing¹⁷.

Unlike men who retire from their paid occupations but remain in their familiar environment, men engaged in farming occupations may be required to leave not only their place of work but also their home when they retire. Deep-seated attachments they may hold to 'the land' may be severed on retirement, which may give rise to unique challenges not faced by their urban 'brothers'. This was apparent in Foskey's study of older farmers' expectations of, and reasons for, retirement¹⁸; she identified that retiring and moving off the land meant losing not only work-related identity, as do men in urban areas, but also their 'connection to place'. Their sense of self was firmly linked with the land.

Ageing and retirement

Successful ageing has been defined as a process where a person continues living with a sense of purpose, engaging in meaningful tasks¹⁹ and social interactions, growth, self acceptance and autonomy, regardless of deteriorating

physical health²⁰. Although the changes associated with retirement of older rural men can be expected to create inner tensions, Foskey's study has highlighted that the retirement experience does not have to be negative. Her participants evidenced the capacity to reconstruct their lives, to develop a 'life beyond the farm gate' and to draw on their breadth of life experiences and quality of relationships to cope (R Foskey, pers comm, 10 March 2004).

Fletcher, Higginbotham & Dobson have decried the limited information on health-related needs, provided by men themselves, which is available to health planners – and when such information has been obtained, it has typically been collected 'following pre-determined, externally measured standards [as opposed to] men's 'felt' or 'expressed' needs (that is, expectations that men have themselves about their own health and/or wellbeing)' (p. 327)²¹. 'It is clear that more work needs to be done to find out... what supports the health and wellbeing of older men living in rural communities' (p. 30)¹⁴. Thus, this study was undertaken to explore the question: What are the retirement experiences of rural men who, in retirement, have left the land?

Methods

Procedure

A phenomenological approach was used to investigate the study question, phenomenology being an inquiry approach designed to explore a person's lived experience^{22,23} - in this case, that of living in retirement away from the farm. In keeping with this approach, semi-structured, individual interviews were used to investigate participants' retirement experiences.

Following receipt of approval from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee, a 'snowball' sampling technique was used whereby a member of the farming community in the New England area of New South Wales, known to the first author, was approached to inform



acquaintances who met the inclusion criteria, about the study. All those who expressed interest were provided with an information letter and an 'Indication of Interest' form to complete and return within 2 weeks to the first author by postage-paid mail. These forms communicated the voluntary nature of participation and requested a contact telephone number.

Participants

To be included in the study, participants were required to have retired and terminated their association with the land – typically through sale of their farm. For most, this meant moving to live in a township. Furthermore, they were to have been retired between 2 and 10 years. The 2 year lower limit was established drawing on evidence that, for retired men, morale is significantly higher in the first 2 years of retirement, after which time morale may diminish with the passing of the first 'flush' of retirement²⁴. It had also been found that higher activity levels and feelings of internal control, which are present in retirees after one year in retirement, may decline after 6-7 years²⁵. The 10 year upper limit was set to ensure sufficient recall of experiences of the transition from living on the land: the highs and lows of settling into retirement. However, after the study had commenced, it became apparent that three participants had been fully retired from farming activities for only 18 months.

The seven study participants (aged from their late 50s to late 60s, and thus all 'relatively young, older men') had engaged in agricultural work as their primary paid occupation. Six of the seven had resided on the land where they worked prior to their retirement, while one worked on the land but lived in a country town. All participants were married and living with their spouse at the time of the study. Most participants had a family history of farming and, on retirement from full-time farming, had moved 'into town' with their spouse. Others, however, moved more gradually into semi-retirement, scaling down the farm size before finally moving into a home in town. Participants had been involved in varying agricultural pursuits (Table 1).

Data collection

One face-to-face interview with each of the seven participants was arranged by telephone. All agreed to be interviewed in their own homes, providing a relaxed setting in which to encourage conversation²⁶. Four chose to have their spouses present for all or part of the interview.

An interview guide approach was used (Fig 1), meaning that the interviews were semi-structured yet conversational²³. The interview guide ensured that similar issues, identified from relevant literature and of interest to the researchers, were explored with each participant. At the same time, the flexibility of structure allowed participants to discuss issues of importance to them, without being confined by the format or content of the interview guide. Some participants also shared photos and memorabilia which were used to prompt further discussion. Interview duration ranged from 60 to 90 min, and all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Data analysis

While data collection was underway, constant comparative analysis of data occurred to facilitate the interpretation of material from each interview and to inform data collection in subsequent interviews²³. At the completion of data collection, a thematic analysis was undertaken as follows. Transcripts were scrutinised to identify 'thought units' as a basis for codes; transcripts were then fully coded and coding categories were created; from these categories, themes were developed to represent major issues raised by participants in relation to the research question (Table 2). Analytic memos written by the first researcher during data collection and analysis, and regular peer consultation between the two researchers, were used as triangulation measures to promote rigour²³.



Table 1: Participant summary

Participant pseudonyms	Farming history	Farming focus	Time in retirement	Reasons for retirement	Retirement path
BRUCE (Wife – Betty)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up on a farm Returned to farming after WWII service 	Crops, cattle & sheep	8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Betty's ill-health Bruce's declining physical fitness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm to retirement village
STAN (Wife – Sue) Sue participated in latter part of the interview and was nearby for remainder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up on sheep farm Worked as a builder until becoming a farmer 	Sheep & later cattle	1.5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sue's ill health and concerns for Stan's health Drought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm to home in town
DON (Wife – Deirdre) Deirdre was nearby during the interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progressed from mechanic to farm hand to farmer manager, to owner 	Cattle, sheep & wheat	2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deirdre's concern for Don's fitness Mutual desire to travel while able Drought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm to home in town Had cattle on leased farm for first 6 months following retirement
NEVILLE (Wife – Norma)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up on dairy farm Family in dairy farming since 1850 	Dairy cattle	1.5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decline in profitability of dairy farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm to home in town
GUS (Wife – Gwen) Gwen was nearby during interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked as radiographer before becoming a farmer 	Chickens, egg production & cattle stud breeding	7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decline in profitability of egg production Final retirement on dissolution of family company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full-time farming to hobby farm 14 years ago and finally to home in town
JACK (Wife – Jan) Jan was present for the latter part of the interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked in sawmills for 22 years before becoming a farmer 	Crops including Lucerne hay	8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water restrictions & drought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm to home in town First wife, Janelle, died 2 years post-retirement Married Jan 6 years later
MARK (Wife – Maude)	Worked in farming since age 19 years	Crops & agricultural consultancy (with a seed company for 45 years)	1.5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultancy ceased with sale of seed company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lived in home in town for last 40 years Considers self to have been semi-retired for last 9 years

WWII, World War II.



- Brief history of former agricultural occupations and lifestyle**
- Questions regarding participant’s enjoyment or satisfaction of working life.
- Issues surrounding retirement**
- Why and how
 - Expectations of retirement and feelings surrounding the move
 - Changes and impacts
 - Reflections with hindsight

Figure 1: Interview guide summary.

Table 2: Derivation of themes from codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Retiring from the land	Significance of the land	Family history Meaning Lifestyle positives Lifestyle negatives
	The retirement transition	Retirement experience Time post-retirement Time pre-retirement
Centrality of relationships	Marriage partnership	Spouse Expectations
	Social interactions	Social interactions
Being ‘involved’ in life		Lifestyle positives Lifestyle negatives Hobbies farming Hobbies retired Expectations

Results and Discussion

In the interviews, participants discussed how they began in their farming careers, the difficulties they encountered along the way (with finances, drought and livestock), and their observations of changes within the agricultural sector. Some of these data have been included in the Results and Discussion section in order to convey elements of the farming context from which participants retired and the meanings associated with this. However, as the focus of this study is on retirement and coping with the transition to retirement, the three themes presented in this article address participants’ experiences of retirement. These include the meaning and significance of the land they farmed, and the associated challenges in adjusting to retired life; the significance of spouses, families and social contacts to the

retirement experience; and the role of hobbies or interests other than farming in making the transition.

Retiring from the land

For the participants, retirement meant severing their relationship with a place of special significance to them, setting in train a sometimes challenging phase of transition encompassing more than just the cessation of paid employment. These issues are discussed in turn.

Significance of the land

Most participants communicated a strong sense of appreciation for the land and the rural lifestyle, expressing not only nostalgia but also a sense of loss at having to leave. As most of the participants had grown up on farms, this may have compounded the strength of their connection with the



land arising from spending their working lives as farmers. All participants expressed a deep sense of satisfaction and meaning gained from being farmers – for example, ‘I’d rather do that than anything else in the world’ (Bruce). This occupation was central to their self-identity, as expressed by Stan: ‘They say you can take the boy out of the bush, but you can’t take the bush out of the boy. Very true’. The land was a cornerstone of their lives:

If you were on the land, it didn’t matter whether you had good times or bad times, whether you had droughts or depression, or anything. When everything finished up... you always had your property to go and start again. (Don)

Stan and Mark highlighted how the solitude and open space of rural living were significant aspects of their lifestyles that they missed when they left the land. For Stan, ‘It was one of my greatest joys in life to just go wandering, go bush...It gave me a chance to think and plan things and to talk to myself’. This allowed him ‘space’ in his marital relationship:

If we started snarling at each other, well there was a simple answer to it. I’d jump on the motor bike and buzz off for a couple of hours and get out of each other’s face. Well here it’s impossible to do that.

Participants also missed working the land, and being in close contact with animals, machinery and plants. As Mark stated, ‘What I miss most is getting out and digging down into the soil’.

The participants’ expressions of a close connection to the land, and their regret with the severance of this connection, resonate with what has been described regarding occupation and a person’s sense of place¹⁷. They also echo Foskey’s findings that, for rural men in particular, the transition to retirement is a difficult path due to the monumental change in environment and lifestyle¹⁸.

The retirement transition

As Gus noted, ‘being retired gives you plenty of time’. For the first 12 months of retirement, Gus had been busily occupied renovating his retirement home. However, as he noted, ‘Now that’s done, yeah! I find myself at a loose end. But...it’s very nice to be at a loose end’. Neville expressed concern that, on return from a post-retirement caravan trip that he and his wife had been planning, he may find retirement ‘a let down’.

The consequences of this can be dire, as Mark noted: ‘I know a lot of farmers that retired...they’d moved off the farm and into town and within 6 months they’d gone’. Similarly, Don stated, ‘Deirdre’s father retired at the age of seventy and 2 years later he was dead’. There are many stories of a similar fate amongst rural men on retirement (C Alderton, pers. comm., 2004). Don attributed this to farmers delaying retirement until they are physically unfit and close to the end of their lives. However, Mark speculated:

I think they’re lost. They’ve had their little plot of land. They’ve been able to get up and wander about and do what they liked... then all of a sudden, they come to town, they’re on a quarter-acre block and they’ve got neighbours to talk to, and they don’t want to talk to them anyway cause they’ve got nothing in common with them...they just get lonely.

A similar view has been expressed in the literature – namely that, on retirement, rural men may experience feelings of ‘nothingness’ and simply lose interest in living².

Participants drew on their own experiences to offer a remedy for this: a phased retirement process. Four participants proposed that farmers should ‘ease out of farming’, rather than move abruptly from full-time farming to full-time retirement away from the land. For example, Gus (and his wife) progressed from full-time egg production to less intensive breeding, moving from their large farm to a hobby-sized farm, before finally retiring to a nearby town. Gus stated that this gradual progression occurred over a period of



13 years and surmised that, 'Had we been in full-time work, it would have been a much harder thing to adapt to'. Stan expressed regret at having retired directly from a large farm into town, stating:

I think we should have wound down more gently...maybe instead of moving into town we would have been happier with a 10 acre block just out of town somewhere.

Whatever their difficulties in making the transition, a common thread of tolerance and 'making the most of it' pervaded all participants' stories. It seemed that these men, although missing the land and their previous farming occupations, were determined to battle through retirement with minimal complaint. As Don stated, 'That's life... I don't like looking back'.

Centrality of relationships

Another key feature of participants' experiences was that of mutuality and interdependence with others. They placed great importance on relationships – with spouses, family and friends - which impacted their retirement experiences, decisions and future plans.

Marriage partnership

All participants described their wives as having a great influence on their decision to retire, as well as on their experience of and feelings about retirement. It was the ill health of Stan, Gus and Bruce's wives that contributed strongly to their retirement decisions. As Stan commented, 'Sue's got multiple sclerosis, so wasn't doing all that well and getting less and less enjoyment out of being on the farm'.

Two wives also expressed concern regarding their husbands' age, physical fitness and ability to continue the heavy manual labour activities required for farming, such as sheep drenching, handling cattle in yards and fencing. 'I could see

the work getting harder, physically harder' (Deirdre). As Sue stated, 'I didn't like the thought of him going down to the cattle yard on his own and not knowing where he was, with his health'. Hence, they strongly recommended that their husbands retire.

Don, Jack and Stan all described farming with their wives as a partnership and a team. Wives helped their husbands on the farm in various capacities, including driving tractors and mustering cattle. Jack described his relationship with his first wife, 'Janelle and I were together. We were a team.' When the health of one or both was failing, the interests of the partnership indicated retirement was necessary.

As the retirement experience has unfolded, participants' wives have continued to have an impact on their husbands' retirement outcomes and the fulfilment of pre-retirement expectations. Stan and Gus expressed their desire to travel in retirement; however, due to their wives' poor health, they were unable to do so. Stan explained:

We wanted to do a lot more travelling...but unfortunately we can't do that now because...even travelling short distances, just sitting in the car, she's a bit of a wreck by the time we get to where we're going.

When asked whether they were happy or satisfied with retirement, participants frequently communicated an air of acceptance of their circumstances related to their wives' needs. Don discussed how much easier living in town was for his wife and stated, 'She likes it...and I'm sort of happy that she does you know, because we've always worked a partnership'. Bruce was also disinclined to complain about his retirement circumstances: 'No, I'm not happy, not satisfied, but I put up with it. I make the best of it'. He expressed a strong sense of commitment and responsibility to his wife to ensure her happiness and not place blame or guilt onto her for his feelings of dissatisfaction or boredom. As Bruce commented:



When we came here it was because of Mum's health [Betty] and I was prepared to do whatever was right for her. And I never said 'Oh gee! You know I should be out sewing oats this afternoon but I'm stuck here like this'. You know I never was like that. No, I'm prepared to stick with whatever goes.

Jack stated that, in retirement, he could cope because he and his wife were together; however, when his wife died one year into retirement, he described the following 6 year period as lonely and 'doubly hard', which made coping after leaving the farm increasingly difficult. He has since remarried and reiterated the significance of having a wife and being together.

Social interactions

The influence of relationships on the retirement experience was not limited to the marriage partnership. Family and friendships also played an important role in participants' experiences of retired life. Participants with few close social or family contacts expressed some dissatisfaction and difficulty coping with the experience. Stan and Neville stated that many of their friends lived away, or had died, while Mark claimed, 'They've all died. So I haven't got any friends. I'm just waiting to go because you know, everyone's just kicked the bucket'. Mark also said he missed his farming friends, stating, 'So now I'm retired and I find it's very boring. I miss the work and I miss the travel and I miss the contact with all the farmers that I worked with.' Mark explained that he felt out of place and lonely among town-dwellers, as though he had nothing in common with them, nothing to talk about and that they would not understand who he was or what sort of work he had been involved in as a farm-consultant. Jack commented how he discovered the importance of friendships as he made the transition from farming to retirement. In farming, solitude was common and, as Jack stated, 'You were working on a farm - you're on your own lots of times...I have a tractor and there's 15 000 hours sitting on it - not talking to anybody.' Once retired, Jack found that it was virtually impossible to cope without friends and reported, 'You've got to sort of come out

of your shell, otherwise you don't make friends and friends are important. You can't go on without them'.

Participants who stated that they enjoyed retirement were also those who had social contacts and/or family living nearby. Neville had sons and grandchildren living on hobby farming blocks near to town, where he was able to visit and help doing odd-jobs. Neville claimed to have resigned himself to 'indulge in reflected glory' from his grandchildren. Bruce also gained great satisfaction through relationships within the retirement village, with his grandchildren, and children with disabilities whom he assisted through a community programme. Gus and Don both stated that several friends had retired to the coast to find that they knew no-one; and some even returned to their local towns after a few years, where their previous friends and social contacts lived. Gus and his wife therefore made the decision to retire to their local village as Gus reasoned, 'Why would we leave (the village), where we knew everybody and go into an area where we didn't know anybody and we'd have to start all over again?'

The literature indicates that successful ageing requires retirees to remain active and engaged in social interactions^{25,27,28}. In this study, those participants who maintained or developed social contacts expressed a positive outlook on the retirement experience. It seemed that participants viewed their relationships with their wives as an important partnership, requiring collaboration when making decisions, and concern for each other's welfare and happiness.

Being 'involved' in life

Participants were questioned regarding the relevance of hobbies and other interests to their retirement experience. All participants explained that farming was not only work to them but, as Stan stated, 'My work had always been my hobby as well'. As a lifestyle, farming can be 'a 24 hours-a-day job and 7 days a week', as Gus described it, which involves being 'married to the farm'. Jack and Neville



expressed similar sentiments about the all-encompassing nature of farming.

During their working lives, the time available for hobbies varied somewhat, according to the type of farming participants were involved in. Whereas Gus, Jack and Neville were 'tied' to their farms, Stan and Don and their wives were able to leave their farms during less busy periods of the year and travel widely. Don was also heavily involved in the local farming community, local government and service organisations.

Jack discussed being retired without interests, and the difficulty of not being actively 'involved' in life or in the community. He described how his retirement experience improved when, 'I come up here and joined Probus. I joined a seniors' group and other groups and Probus would go away on trips...so that relieved it a lot.' When Don and his wife retired, it was with the aim of being fit to travel and 'do things that you want to do'. Don was also maintaining a busy lifestyle undertaking home renovations – although with the prospect of being more 'at a loose end' once renovations were complete. All couples expressed interest in travel and, when questioned regarding their expectations of retirement, all mentioned travelling as an activity of interest that they had wished and expected to do more of in retirement. Some, however, were unable to do so due to the health or activities of their spouse.

Participants reported that hobbies or activities needed to be meaningful and of interest, not simply mundane time-fillers. Stan highlighted this as he shared his dissatisfaction with retirement. He stated that he wasn't bored and, to the contrary, he kept himself busy with many odd backyard jobs, laying cement and planning to install a swimming pool at his wife's request. He had activities and jobs to do; however, these held no meaning or interest for him. He commented, 'You've got nothing to do that you really want to do'. Mark had also tried various hobbies including woodwork, reading and golf. However, his interest in life had been farming and he had been unable to find another activity to similarly interest him in retirement.

Previous research has promoted the need to develop a sense of purpose and meaning in life that continues throughout retirement^{1,20}. Studies have found that engaging in leisure activities moderates the negative effects of stressful life events²⁹; however, a balance of work, rest and leisure is important before and after retirement¹. Engagement in meaningful tasks contributes to a person's self-concept and wellbeing¹⁹. This study found that participants who expressed enjoyment with retirement were those who also reported being actively involved in hobbies, interests and social groups as a retiree. Boredom and dissatisfaction were commonly expressed by participants with few interests. This reflected literature which discussed how lack of engagement in activities has a negative impact on life enjoyment²⁷.

Limitations

There was considerable variation among participants in the length of retirement experience that they were reflecting on – from 18 months to 8 years. This study has captured their perspectives on retirement at a particular point in time. It may be that, in time, participants who expressed frustration with retirement might become more satisfied, while others currently enjoying retirement may later become less satisfied as the retirement experience changes.

All participants in this study were married, and their spouses were important to their retirement experience. What is more, some spouses were present during interviews; participants may have been constrained in expressing their views on retirement while their spouses were present, with consequent implications for the truth-value of results³⁰.

The gender of the first researcher (who conducted the interviews) and the first researcher's own rural background may also have given rise to preconceived opinions and values, influencing the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Although considerable effort was made to bring rigour to the research process, as previously outlined, the above issues should be kept in mind by those seeking to apply the outcomes of this research to other retired, rural men.



Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the retirement experience for rural men who have moved off the land. It is hardly surprising that the land and farming held great significance for these participants and that some missed the open space, working with the soil, machinery, animals and plants.

Adapting to environmental change was considered to be easier when scaling down farming activities and property size gradually, rather than moving directly from full-time farming to retirement in town. Participants expressing satisfaction and enjoyment in retirement were also those who had maintained or developed social connections and interests apart from farming. These findings reflected literature previously discussed regarding the importance of social interaction and of a sense purpose to successful retirement. It was also found that participants valued the companionship of their wives, viewing the relationship as a partnership and making decisions with each other's needs and interests in mind.

The literature has indicated that rural men might experience an increase in health problems when retiring, due to displacement and possible dissatisfaction with retired life. While participants in this study were asked about their health, little comment was made about the impact of retirement on health. One participant reported problems with depression, while another stated that his physical health had improved. Most participants expressed an overall satisfaction with, or tolerance of, retirement, and tended to focus on the more positive aspects of life. A more comprehensive study would be needed to assess changes to the physical and mental health of rural men with retirement.

There is a need for health professionals to encourage retired people to stay active and be involved in life through social activities and interests^{2,24,28}. For retirees who may have moved home and become socially isolated, providing information on community groups and activities may help to promote social engagement. People approaching retirement

should be encouraged to plan not only for financial stability but also for maintaining purpose and balance in life through meaningful activities and relationships^{1,31}.

A focus for future research may be to determine the most effective methods of decreasing isolation and breaking down real or perceived barriers between retired people and their community. This study found that the marriage partnership was a major source of stability and support for retired rural men. Conducting research with wives of retired farmers may also provide valuable insight into the effects of change and coping mechanisms employed. Further studies might also explore the retirement experience for rural men who are divorced, single or widowed.

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