PARTICIPATION, IDENTITY AND CULTURE:

AN EXPLORATION OF CHANGING SUBJECTIVITIES THROUGH THE LIFE TRAJECTORIES, AND SOCIAL AND WORK PRACTICES OF SELECTED FARM WOMEN

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Abstract

This thesis explores the lives and experiences of farm women through identifying and elaborating their changing subjectivities as ‘farm wives’: a career entered through marriage rather than by vocational preference. It does this through using auto/ethnographic and ethnographic approaches in a study that engaged nine informants principally, but many more through its conduct. Importantly, the thesis gives voice and legitimacy to the place and dreams of women on farms and it has exposed silences that have been ‘a shelter for power’. This exposé has been a revelation to those farming women and men who have lived secluded, private lives furiously protecting a myth of the farm ‘wife’ as fulfilled and happy while living life vicariously, largely through her husband’s achievements. Issues of power, gender, isolation and entrapment are revealed through advancing issues of subjective change within a zealous and often unforgiving culture where the myth and propaganda do not match the realities of these women’s lives. Maintaining self and maintaining culture far from being manifested as times of stability, require some volatility as they both command transformative and, sometimes, contradictory change to sustain the woman’s humanness while ensuring the sustainability of the New Zealand icon – the family farm. Central to the resolution of how farming women sustain and transform their ‘selves’, are their capacities for intentionality, agency and empowerment. An ability to negotiate or renegotiate a life for one’s ‘self’ is entangled in the complex web of relations between farm, work, family and culture. While influenced by personal intent and agency, this sense of self is informed by one’s personal history. Intentionality, then, is a critical concept to consider in attempting to isolate motivational drives; in seeking resolution for such dilemmas. Intention comprises individual agency exercised as personal choice, as opposed to social agency constrained in the form of pressure to conform and meet cultural expectations. However, many of these women have difficulty isolating personal intention due to social and cultural intent dominating their thinking and actions to a point where they sub-consciously take ownership of those objectives. It seems from the participating women, though, that a drive for self-knowledge is compelling.

Advanced here is an elaboration of how these ‘farm wives’ negotiated, reconstructed and reshaped their sense of self, and, at times, also strongly resisted and dis-identified with the social world in which they found themselves unwittingly, and at times unwillingly embedded. Calls are made for challenging and changing cultural expectations while prioritising women’s needs. Key contributions concern the salience of: (1) the central role of ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’ as a function of managing geographical, psychosocial, financial, emotional, intellectual and genderised isolations, along with negotiating a culture of masculinisation; (2) maintenance of self existing as a function of a sense of belonging, without which maintenance is elusive and issues of entrapment often manifest as matriarchal power and control between competing generations of women; (3) maintenance and transformation of one’s ‘self’ critically requiring strength of personal agency; and (4) the negotiations of women who continue to defy the norms, reasserting resistance while negotiating ‘self’ and in doing so transform both their ‘self’ and their culture. Needs for further enquiry are raised regarding: the cultural relationships between patriarchy and matriarchy and ensuing entrapments; the cultural lag of farming culture in regard to feminist change; and the sustainability of individuals struggling to ‘belong’ to a culture not of their choosing.

Saliently, this research has resonated with New Zealand farming women of all ages and also with young farming men who are struggling with the resistance of young women to marry onto farms. The response, while challenging, indicates strong relevance and critical need.

Keywords: farm women, subjectivity, self, identity, agency, intent, social, gender, power, control, patriarchy, matriarchy, isolations, entrapment, becoming, belonging, maintenance, transformation, culture, resistance, masculinisation, social inclusiveness or exclusiveness, choice, silencing, policing, feminism, ethnography, narrative
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed:
Acknowledgements

A little over four years have been expended in this PhD research project. A time during which life has had many twists and turns. The first two years were remarkably unremarkable and the research process very enjoyable. But the last 2.5 years have been challenging in many ways. James (son) has successfully fought a very challenging cancer of the tongue; a brutal reminder of the preciousness of life. Concurrently, Tom (husband) challenged my coping skills by being struck down with Legionnaires Disease, again beating the odds. Daniel, Rachel, Reuben, Kate and Kris and many others were major sources of support amongst all this.

On a brighter note, two precious grandsons were born - Tom 2½ years old and Ben 5 months old - both of whom are reaping the best genes from both sides of their heritage. Along with these milestones, farming and associated business commitments (including major issues with Transpower NZ Ltd), unplanned media and public attention (in regard to this research) and the building of a new house have all been demanding and time consuming. So it is with some relief and satisfaction that I complete this amazing and challenging journey. Truly, for me it has been a transformative personal odyssey.

Obviously many people have contributed to this completion:

- On a personal note, particularly extended family, friends and interested people.
- Also, farming men and women, who have responded to the media attention this research attracted, by phoning, writing and emailing me with words of support and appreciation for opening up their worlds and exposing their silent realities. This support has been invaluable.
- Particular thanks go to the nine women who played major roles through sharing their most intimate lives and secrets which enabled production of an account that is as close to the truth as possible. This is their contribution to their social worlds, to their mix of cultures and to their courageous ‘selves’.
- Other women (and men), who participated through the extensive ethnographic component, have likewise contributed to possibly instigating change in a very traditional and conservative culture.
- Dr. Maureen Doherty has accompanied me on my academic ride for a number of years and as my external supervisor for this PhD project has added invaluable knowledge, support and friendship along with much needed social contact. Though meeting ‘on the road’ we have had numerous interesting, soul searching discussions in many cafes and restaurants in many small towns in Canterbury and Otago. At times, in latter months, she has kept me sane by her ready and rational responses.
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the rock on which this research stands. His dedication, along with his depth of knowledge and ready responses, has been very impressive and greatly appreciated. He has gone well beyond merely doing a job and has invested personal time, effort and support. Through Stephen, in addition to the thesis, I have had the opportunity to publish chapters in two edited books (Appendix 3), which is an added bonus and a source of personal pride. So, my thanks go to him (along with the other editors) for that generosity and confidence.

Here now, joining with all these people and many others too many to mention, I present the thesis bearing in mind Van Maanen’s words:

“I simply don’t believe that there is any such notion of the crucial experiment or pathbreaking study in the social sciences – each work is connected to a larger body (both the authors and the fields) [and I add, the people] and the cumulative effect of a stream of work, or development of a theory circle that influences the field, not a single work and certainly not a single article” (cited Frost & Stablein, 1992, p. 288).

My hope is that many lives are enriched by the knowledge built on many others’ work.
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