OUT-MIGRATION: YOUNG VICTORIANS AND THE FAMILY FARM

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Studies of the out-migration of young people from rural areas rely heavily on the push and pull factors of the need to move for higher education and jobs. But the broad-brush picture these studies provide misses much of the complexity of the young people's decision making. Questionnaire data and interviews with young people living on family farms in Victoria show that many would like to stay, but the fear of being seen to be a failure is a powerful force goading them to move, irrespective of their personal wishes.

RURALITY, YOUTH AND OUT-MIGRATION

Young people are amongst Australia's most mobile groups, with their internal migration pattens differing along specific lines.[1] Long-established out-migration trends,[2] for example, have resulted in an under-representation of young people in rural areas.[3] Policy makers and others are uneasy about this trend today[4] and, as the following penned some 60 years ago attests, such concerns are longstanding:

> In spite of the fact that the majority of people we interviewed pointed out the superiority of country town life, there was a general complaint that too many young people leave country towns for the city. Two reasons given for this: 'They have to go to Melbourne to get jobs.' 'They think the country is too slow for them. They want "a good time" in the city'.[5]

The consequences of this pattern have been measured in terms of a loss of dynamic human and social capital and identity[6] from rural areas to the degree that some commentators fear for the sustainability of rural communities.

As the above quote exemplifies, analysis of out-migration tends to rely upon well-established structural push and pull factors: a presumed lack of local opportunities for employment, education and training pushing young people out of small centres whilst desired educational and occupational opportunities pull them into larger centres.[7] An emergent body of research, however, suggests that structural factors alone do not account for the complexity of young peoples migration decisions.

Perceptions of and attachment to place and community are integral to migration activities. A UK study, for example, found that rather than simply surrendering to structural pressures, some young rural residents 'lower[ed] their aspirations' in order to stay or return.[8] Research has consistently shown that young people characterise rural areas, at times concurrently, as supportive and safe and as 'gold fish bowls'[9] in which processes of surveillance, marginalisation and exclusion take place. Jones argues that 'it is not simply … that the disaffected leave and the attached stay',[10] and research from New Zealand supports this. When asked to consider their experiences of community young New Zealanders reported 'either inclusion or ambiguous or *simultaneous* feelings of belonging and marginalisation'.[11] As reported in an Australian study, such complex sentiments may well be developed within a context in which migratory actions are discussed in terms of 'success' and 'failure': the successful leave and do not return.[12] In such a context young people who stay in rural areas risk being seen as failures.

Studies such as these suggest that if policy makers want to stem the out-migration of young people from rural areas they will need to do more than simply provide greater educational and/or employment opportunities.[13] Rural out-migration is not governed by structural factors alone; young people fearing being stigmatised as failures may leave even when they in fact might prefer to stay. It is unfortunate that, despite receiving submissions with regard to the impacts of community perception and social exclusion, the recent Victorian *Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities* report makes no mention of these impacts in its 56 recommendations.[14]

Whilst the out-migration of young people from rural areas has received much attention, explicit study of the experiences of young people who live on family farms, as opposed to those who live in regional towns, has been absent from this body of literature. The rural experience is heterogeneous. Whilst this is recognised in some fields of study,[15] the literature on out-migration currently lags behind.

Australia's agricultural industries consist predominantly of 'small to medium family sized businesses'[16] which are indebted to a tradition of intergenerational transfer.[17] Consequently, beyond a loss from community of dynamic human and social capital and identity, the out-migration of young people from family farms represents a challenge to the traditional structure of these industries. Furthermore, we now know that family farms function as complex, sometimes ambiguous, sources of identity, pride and attachment;[18] this knowledge means that examining out-migration activities amongst this population is especially important.

This paper represents a move towards a more critical engagement with rural youth out-migration by drawing attention to the lives of 138 young Victorians from family farms. It argues that whilst well-established structural push and pull factors are important, these young people's experiences cannot be understood without reference to the complexity of their perceptions of the community's evaluation of their decisions and their own attachment to the family farm and the broader community.

NOTES ON METHOD
This paper is extracted from a broader study of the social-scapes in which post-school plans were considered for young people living on family farms in Victoria. Research was conducted during 2001–02 in four towns: 'Gippsvale' (Gippsland shire), 'Mallee-town' (Mallee shire), 'Campburg' (Campaspe shire) and 'Glen-borough' (Glenelg shire). Across the four sites, 138 students attending secondary school years 10, 11 or 12 and living on a family farm completed a questionnaire. A subset of 37 participated in an interview in 2001 and a follow-up interview in 2002. Both sources of data are used in this paper.

WILL THEY LEAVE?
This section begins with an account of the preferred residential location of partici-pants. Given that perceptions about place have been found to contribute to migratory decision-making, it then explores participants' perceptions of farm living. Finally, data collected longitudinally provide for analysis of the out-migration experiences of the subset of the sample.

Where would you prefer to live?
Most participants valued farm life. Asked to indicate their preferred place of resi-dence, 59 per cent of participants indicated that they would choose the farm: those from Gippsvale and Glenborough, and males, were most likely to give this re-

Table 1: Preference for living on the farm, by site

	Gippsvale	Mallee-town	Campburg	Glenborough	Total
Yes	11	12	40	19	82
No	3	12	26	5	46
Missing data	—	5	3	2	10
Total	14	29	69	26	138

Table 2: Preference for living on the farm, by sex

	Female	Male	Total
Yes	37	45	82
No	29	17	46
Missing data	8	2	10
Total	74	64	138

sponse (see Tables 1 and 2). Significantly, females comprised most of the responses coded as 'missing data', and most of the eight writing 'yes *and* no'.

While most participants indicated a preference for farm living, it is not the case that they also desired a career in farming. Only 24 of the 138 reported, often alongside one or more other occupational fields, that they *would* 'like to be a farmer'. That is, although most suggested that the farm was a desirable place to live, they did not necessarily want carers as farmers. These findings indicate a strong attachment to the family farm and a lifestyle that many found to be, as we will see, both a burden and a blessing.

Perceptions of living on the family farm
The most prominent themes to emerge from participants' accounts of the 'best thing' about living on the farm were: *spac-es*, *entertainment*, *freedoms*, *natural environments* and *aspects of farming*. Participants from Campburg and Glenborough emphasised space, those from Gippsvale and Mallee-town *entertainment* (Table 3). Female participants valued *space* and males, *entertainment*, followed closely by space (Table 4). Indicative of the strength and diversity of sentiment in relation to the best things about living on a farm, one male participant wrote '*nothing*' whilst another wrote '*everything*'.

The 'worst thing' about living on the farm included references to: travel, *distance from town*, *aspects of farming*, *distances from friends*, and *isolation*. For those living in Gippsvale and Campburg *distances from town* were the worst aspects, *travel* for those from Mallee-town, and *aspects of farming* in Glenborough (Table 5): for males (who tended to occupy greater roles on the farm) *aspects of farming* were considered the worst dimensions and for females *travel* (Table 6). Two males wrote '*nothing*'.

Spaces and distances
Space and distance were strong themes. Providing 'privacy' and 'room to move [where] … people can't see what you have been doing' were positive dimensions of farm life. Respondents who gave these answers also often mentioned that in these relatively small communities 'everyone knows everyone'. While space was ben-

Table 3: The best thing about living on the farm, by site

	Gippsvale (n=14)	Mallee-town (n=29)	Campburg (n=69)	Glenborough (n=26)	Total (n=138)
Space	2	9	43	12	66
Entertainment	8	17	23	8	56
Freedoms	4	9	15	11	39
Natural environments	1	2	13	5	21
Aspects of farming	2	3	11	5	21

Note: Data were obtained from open-ended questions and thematic codes subsequently developed from the data. As all themes were coded, columns do not sum to n (n=number of participants).

Table 4: The best thing about living on the farm, by sex

	Female (n=74)	Male (n=64)	Total (n=138)
Space	40	26	66
Entertainment	27	29	56
Freedoms	18	21	39
Natural environments	15	6	21
Aspects of farming	9	12	21

Note: See Table 3.

eficial, distances were considered by many to be detrimental.

Mallee-town was the most remote site. It produced the greatest proportion of references to 'isolation' and accounted for the largest proportion of participants lamenting travel to 'town' and to 'the city' as the worst things about living on the farm. Participants frequently reported that living on the farm precluded them from spending time with friends or simply 'hang[ing] down the street' as their town based friends did after school and on weekends. Living on a farm with limited, often conditional access to transport, was an impediment to maintaining a fulfilling social life: 'Because it is so far out of town we are limited … Now that I have my Ps [provisional driving plates] I have some freedom and don't have to rely on Mum and Dad to get me into town'. One participant, however, shared an uncommon view: 'some people that live on farms hate it 'cos they're too far away from their friends. The way I see it they're only a telephone call away'.

Entertainment, freedoms and the natural environments
Living on a farm provided for a sense of freedom, a location and resources for entertainment: 'driving', 'riding motorbikes', and 'shooting' were among the most common farm-based activities enjoyed by these young Victorians. Analysis revealed that the pleasure of being able to drive, particularly before their peers, was enjoyed equally by males and females. Many participants expressed the following sentiments: 'You can shoot or ride motorbikes all day long if your parents will let you, as long as they don't mind you can practically do what you like'. Farms were described as peaceful, natural environments. One participant wrote that the best thing about living on the farm was the

Table 5: The worst thing about living on the farm, by site

	Gippsvale (n=14)	Mallee-town (n=29)	Campburg (n=69)	Glenborough (n=26)	Total (n=138)
Travel	1	13	24	7	45
Distances from town	6	3	29	7	45
Aspects of farming	2	6	18	9	35
Distances from friends	4	8	16	5	33
Isolation	1	8	3	3	15

Note: See Table 3.

Table 6: The worst thing about living on the farm, by sex

	Female (n=74)	Male (n=64)	Total (n=138)
Travel	35	10	45
Distances from town	27	18	45
Aspects of farming	14	21	35
Distances from friends	18	15	33
Isolation	8	7	15

Note: See Table 3.

'peace and quiet': 'you can get away from it on a farm'.

Aspects of farming
A greater number of male participants indicated that aspects of farming were the best thing about living on the farm. In general, but not always, male participants were those with greater levels of ongoing responsibility on the farm. There was 'always work to be done' and several participants said they 'enjoyed' or 'liked' the 'hard work' and appreciated 'being paid' for their labour. Furthermore, they suggested that there were valuable life lessons to be learned from living on the farm and being involved in agriculture. There were also aspects of farm life that did not sit well: there was 'always something to fix', 'something always goes wrong', 'having to put the cows back in', 'stepping in cow shit', and 'dragging away dead sheep' amongst these. For one male, the burden was unambiguous: the worst thing about living on the farm was 'working on weekends'.

These data suggest that perceptions of farm life and attachment to it are mixed. If researchers want to understand rural migration decisions they must begin from the position that these sentiments are complex and interrelated. Potential migrants can simultaneously feel a sense of belonging and marginalisation. In this context differentiating between push and pull factors is distinctly problematic as they are often different sides of the same coin. Young people's desire for a tertiary qualification and non-farm employment was not inconsistent with a longing for farm living. People who want higher education and a non-farm career will not necessarily leave. Nor, as the following section reports, is an interest in farming or a high regard for farm living a simple predictor of those who would remain. But

at the time of follow-up interviews of the 37 in the interview sub-set most school-leavers had in fact moved away in the pursuit of educational or occupational goals.

Where are they now and what about tomorrow?
Of the 37 participants re-interviewed during 2002, 14 were no longer attending secondary school and were either in full-time employment or undertaking tertiary education. Four of the group had remained in their local area (three living at home) (Table 7). Furthermore, few thought that their parents expected that they would take over the family farm in the future. Only one of the 14 was working on the family farm.

Structural push and pull factors were clearly instrumental in the migratory actions of these young Victorians. Ten of them felt that they had to leave to pursue occupational and educational goals. But the four who were living and working locally said they were satisfied with their decision to remain. Satisfied with his current location, one young man who had left stated that visiting home was not a priority: he missed 'nothing' about the farm and the community he had grown up in. His attachment to these domains was not strong. Generally, however, those who had relocated experienced periods of disruption and uncertainty about their decisions, some

Table 7: Residential locations of 14 participants who had left school at follow-up interview, by sex

	Female	Male	Total
Living locally	1	3	4
Moved away	5	5	10
Total	6	8	14

describing significant difficulty adjusting to life in their new locations.

'Missing' the 'farm', 'family' and the 'community' were common themes in follow-up interviews with the 10 who had left and for most, financial constraints and large distances prohibited frequent visits home. One young woman, however, returned each weekend to play netball, as she had done since childhood. Subsidised by her parents, she moved between her weekday city home and familial home each week. This arrangement enabled her to work towards her academic goals whilst preserving links with her former life. Her attachment to 'home' was strong. Others similarly spoke of returning, most often for brief holidays or long weekends and when they did the question of whether they were 'making it' in the city was the subject of regular conversation.

One male, for example, described having moved to the city for a time and subsequently returning to live and work in his local area. He said that whilst his parents had 'not really' wanted him to move to the city, 'they knew he was coming back' (his brother had similarly returned after a short period in the city). In light of concerns raised in the literature and by other participants regarding issues of 'success', the young man was asked if he was concerned about potential backlash. His response indicated that negative community sentiment was not an issue: 'I think most of the people here thought I was going to stay [on the farm], so to up and move was a bit weird … when I went away trying to follow that [other] career everyone was surprised by that'. This young man took great pride in the fact that he was now working on his family's farm.

In marked contrast to these experiences, a female participant said that even though she was unhappy with moving away, she was simply unable to return. She had been encouraged to leave the vicinity

of her rural town and the local job she had coveted had been filled. Thus she believed that there was neither opportunity nor possibility to return:

> … as much as I say that I want to [come back] … I would be too scared about what people would say. I have seen what they say about other people that have done it and I would be too scared about what they would say about me … I think it is hard in a small community because of how much you see and how much people talk … I think that plays on your mind as well, for your parents as well.

Despite these feelings, this young woman went home every week but her weekly homecoming was significantly different to that of the young woman who continued to play in the district netball competition. In this case the participant's weekly visit involved secreting herself away in the family's farm house so that 'no one would know' that she had come home. She was ashamed and frustrated by this situation: she was not 'making it' in the city but felt that she could not return. She could see no escape from this predicament.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper highlights the complex social-scape within which 138 young Victorians were making decisions about their future. This study revealed that whilst many held strong, complex, attachments to the family farm they did not necessarily see themselves becoming farmers. For the subset whose locations were tracked into the next year and who had left school, it was apparent that well-established structural factors such as access to further education and employment necessarily required many to move from their familial homes and communities. Thus, in relation to whether these young people were likely to stay in these areas, in the short term the answer is clearly no: most will leave. Whilst these findings were not unexpected, the strength of this study is found in revealing the impact and complexity of non-structural factors such as young people's perception of the opinions of others in the community and their mixed feelings of attachment to, and disengagement from, that community.

To speak of the disaffected leaving or the engaged staying belies the complexity of the decision to go or stay: such claims suggest a singularity of perception not supported in this study. Whilst attracting little attention at a policy level, as evidenced by the RRSDC report,[19] this research revealed that out-migration decisions and experiences cannot be understood without reference to the complexity of perceptions and attachment to the family farm and broader community. It is clear that, beyond the provision of education and jobs, community attitudes act as barriers and/or enablers to young people's decisions. Many young people may have a strong attachment to farming and/or the farming lifestyles and some may want to return to these locations at a latter point in their lives, community sentiment may in fact act against this. Accordingly, if we continue to emphasise structural dimensions alone in explaining and responding to the migration activities of young people from rural areas and family farms, we will continue to miss an important part of the picture.

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