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Truck journeys and land parcels:
Understanding the socio-economic organization of family farming through farm life histories

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Abstract

Conceptual advancements for understanding the organization of family farms have not yet initiated parallel debates about how they might be aligned with the methods used to understand them. Customization of a novel research approach – farm life history – for an investigation of the socio-economic organization of forty Australian farms responds to this literature gap. Individual farm life histories were initiated using farm tours (truck journeys) in which changes to the composition of land parcels prompted research conversations. The researcher and participants benefited from using motorized transport and travelling while talking, but the benefits were experienced unevenly across research encounters.

Keywords: Farm life history; family farm organization; mobile interviews; land ownership; Australia
Family farms in developed nations were long considered a distinct form of agricultural production because of the unique dynamics between an economic and a social domain – the farm business and the farm household (Gasson and Errington 1993; Moran, Blunden, and Greenwood 1993; Johnsen 2003). The significance of place in theorizations of farm organization requires that the farm business and the farm household are always situated; that is, they are “inexorably entwined with a third, physical domain – the farm property” (Johnsen 2003, 131; original emphasis). Inclusion of the property domain, Johnsen argued, acknowledges the ways in which the condition of farmland, infrastructure and stock shape the social and economic terrains of the farm just as farm actors respond to changes in their socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. In this article, I argue that this conceptual advancement has implications for the research methodologies and data generation techniques that rural researchers adopt when working with farmer participants.

Specifically, I engage with the question: how can these conceptual developments inform research practice when investigating the social and economic geographies of family farms? I address this question by extending a novel research technique called farm life history developed by Riley (2010; see also, Riley and Harvey 2007). Drawing upon the epistemological underpinnings of oral history, the farm life history approach is a methodology that privileges people’s personal recollections of events from their own lifetimes. The key difference between oral history and farm life history is the way in which the historical development of the farm is positioned as the subject of enquiry vis-à-vis the lifetimes of individual farm actors. This shift in focus is achieved by discussing ‘the farm’, a place in which “individual and collective histories intersect,” and by including mobile interviews outdoors on the farm (Riley 2010, 653).

Drawing upon his experience of generating farm life histories to investigate agricultural and landscape change in the United Kingdom, Riley argues that these data
generation techniques have practical and theoretical advantages for research encounters. To date, however, there have been no other reports of the utility of farm life history to explore different research problems in alternate agricultural contexts. I contribute toward filling this gap in the literature by critically reflecting upon the farm life history approach as applied to an investigation of the socio-economic organization of forty family farms in the Australian state of Victoria. In this study, I extend Riley’s approach by aligning the development of individual farm life histories with contemporary conceptualizations of family farming, the outcome of which is more explicit recognition of theoretical developments within the methods used to investigate the socio-economic organization of Australian farming. The development of each farm life history was initiated using truck journeys\(^1\) – deliberately carrying out interviews while touring farms – during which the researcher and research participant visited the land parcel boundaries of the respective farm. The chronological development of ‘the farm business’ was used as an organizing principle to situate the farm as the topic of discussion. Initiating farm life histories in this way benefited the researcher and the farmers involved; but these benefits were not experienced evenly across all research encounters. I critically reflect upon these differences in the second half of this article with a view to assisting other researchers who are considering the use of mobile interviewing and/or researchers who are interested in understanding better the organization of family farms. Before doing so, though, I establish the rationale for more closely integrating contemporary conceptualizations of family farming with the research methods used to explore their socio-economic organization.

**Using farm life history to explore the socio-economic organization of family farms**

In his appraisal of farm life history, Riley (2010) is careful to point out that exact replication of his approach to other research problems is not the objective; his framework should simply be used as a template. In this section, I highlight how I customized the farm
life history approach to my own research question concerning the socio-economic organization of family farming in Australia. First, I briefly outline Riley’s argument for making explicit the farm in research practice, then I outline an alternative argument suited to the Australian context.

Following Anderson (2004), Riley situates his argument for making central the place of the farm in research encounters involving farmers within theorizations of identity formation (2010). He draws upon the notion of ‘constitutive co-ingredience’: an idea that not only encapsulates the “reciprocal influence” between people and places, but also acknowledges that the self and place are “essential to the being of the other” (Casey 2001, 684). Consistent with this notion is the dominant view concerning the reciprocal influence between farmers and the places where they farm, a view that emphasizes the locally embedded nature of farmers and the intimate relationship they have with the land (Convery et al. 2005; Dominy 2001; Gray 1998). This interdependency between farmers and their farms means that “the farm space … is imbued with meaning” which, if strategically harnessed in research methodologies, can enrich our understanding of farmers’ practices and lifeworlds (Riley 2010, 652).

In contrast to this, a small body of literature is emerging that reports how wider restructuring processes are disrupting both these dynamics and the role of the farm in the formation of farmer identities. In Cheshire, Meurk and Woods’ (2013, 72) study of highly mobile, ‘globally engaged’ Australian farmers, they “identified a more tenuous relationship between farm and place” because the transnational nature of their participants’ business activities had reconstituted their place attachments. Other researchers have pointed to similar processes occurring in other contexts, suggesting that the reconstitution of farmers’ place attachments is not limited to Australia’s small, highly mobile farming population. For example, Johnsen (2004) reported that in New Zealand broader agricultural reforms initiated
changes in farm organization that were contributing to the re-articulation of farmers’ identities, which were increasingly connected to sources outside the farm. This alternative view does not contradict the dominant view concerning farmers’ relationships with the places in which they farm. Instead it suggests that farmers’ identities and their connections to the physical space of the farm are multi-faceted and complex, commonly expressed in varying degrees across time and space (Cheshire, Meurk, and Woods 2013). The implication for rural researchers is that we should not assume that all farmers in all places have deep attachments to their farms. Of course this position does not undermine the importance of the physical space of the farm to either family farming or the ways in which researchers investigate change at the farm-level.

Johnsen’s (2003) actor- and context-sensitive model of family farming provides an alternative rationale for incorporating the farm space into methodological practices that potentially enrich the research encounter in ways similar to those reported by Riley (2010). In Johnsen’s model, the influence of the material aspects of farms (e.g., land quality and farm size) upon the socio-economic relations of farming is explicitly recognized through her inclusion of a property domain alongside the well-established domains of a farm business and a farm household. Her study revealed how the physical attributes of farms, in the Waihemo farming district in New Zealand, shaped farmers’ responses to changed macro-economic circumstances. For example, farmland in the region was primarily suited to dry land, sheep and cattle grazing but not to more intensive agricultural purposes. These material aspects of the region delineated farmers’ opportunities to diversify their farms in particular ways when compared to the opportunities available to farmers in other New Zealand farming regions (see Coombes and Campbell 1996). Johnsen limited her analysis of the property domain largely to the material aspects of farms, but the term property should sensitize us to broader conceptualizations of the notion, which might also be recognized in research practices.
Property is also a mechanism for ordering social relations (Singer 2000). The ways in which property relations shape and are shaped by the other domains of farm enterprises are generally not well understood (Johnsen 2003; Winter 2007). Despite this, there is an emerging consensus that property and land tenure arrangements are key to the organization of agriculture at the farm and industry levels, as well as in the context of broader rural transitions (Forbord, Bjørkhaug, and Burton 2014; Holmes 2011; Ilbery et al. 2010; Marsden et al. 1993). Although this growing body of literature is often limited to the ownership or classical model of property (a model that has been critiqued as too narrow (see Blomley 2005)), broadening Johnsen’s property domain to include the proprietary arrangements that farmers use to access land resources provides the entry point for aligning conceptual models of family farming with the methods used to understand them.

“The simple fact that land stays put while people move and form new relationships underlies the dynamic relation of landholding to social [and, in this case, farm] organization” (Brookfield and Parsons 2007, 29). Put another way, farm boundaries reflect the social and economic domains of family farms and thus, farm boundaries may be used to illuminate the historical dynamics between the three domains. For example, the sale of a land parcel might be influenced by a farmer’s need to reduce debt to provide financial security to a household with young children. Similarly, the death of a neighboring landowner might provide opportunities for farm expansion through acquiring lease tenure to adjoining land parcels while the deceased farmers’ estate is settled. Conceivably, a range of factors internal (e.g., personal desire to grow the business) and external (e.g., professional advice, commodity prices, interest rates) to the farm might drive such expansion.

From a methodological perspective, these examples, highlighting potential interdependencies between the three domains of family farms, challenge rural researchers to consider how narratives that uncover these dynamics may be generated. Consistent with
Riley’s approach, I suggest that the farm should be positioned as the subject of enquiry. In contrast to his approach, I argue that the farm business domain be utilized as an organizing principle for research conversations rather than simply talking about a farm’s history vis-à-vis individual actors’ histories (see Riley 2010). This does not suggest that the farm business is central to the socio-economic organization of farming; it simply underscores the fact that it is the domain that is common throughout a farm’s development. Farmers’ lives, their households, and the combination of landholdings change over time, sometimes quite dramatically. Since the establishment of a given agricultural enterprise, though, there has always been a business alongside which other more variable aspects of farm organization can be traced.

How, then, might research conversations about these matters be initiated? Consistent with Riley’s evaluation, I suggest that deliberately emplacing research encounters outside on the farm are a useful addition to the rural researcher’s methodological toolbox. Farm tours enable researchers and interviewees to visit and observe the full extent of a farm’s land holdings. In addition to the material assemblages encountered (e.g., crops, stock, buildings), the present-day boundary fence lines can act as triggers for the re-telling of changes made to land parcel composition and the interdependencies with the broader socio-economic organization of the particular farm.

In sum, the farm life history approach implemented in this study aligned with conceptual developments that construct family farms as a three-way coalition between a farm business, a farm household and property. Individual farm life histories were structured around the ‘business life history’ and provided the longitudinal thread around which broader developments were explored during conversations triggered by changes in the composition of land holdings.
The techniques used to generate data for the farm life history approach are simply modifications of traditional qualitative research methods; modifications that have practical and theoretical advantages for research encounters (Riley 2010). Mobile interviewing, in particular, has received positive appraisals from researchers who have used the technique to investigate a range of non-agricultural topics, including radical environmentalism (Anderson 2004), discrimination and prejudice (Brown and Durrheim 2009), and education (Kusenbach 2012). However, the utility of mobile interviewing, and farm life history more broadly, in different agricultural contexts is largely unknown. In the next section, I provide critical reflections about deliberately using farm tours to initiate farm life histories and the implications of this technique for uncovering farm-level change.

**Generating farm life histories in practice: Lessons from Australia**

Forty farm tours – truck journeys – were undertaken in two farming regions within the Australian state of Victoria (Figure 1A). The length of each tour was determined by the time available on the part of the farmer or farming couple, the responses they provided, and the size of their farm. Farm tours were on average 2.25 hours in duration; the shortest was 45 minutes, and the longest was 7 hours. The conversations with farmers during the tours were not audio recorded because electronic recording devices might disrupt the interaction between the researcher and the participant, rendering the latter more cautious when articulating his/her narrative (Flick, 2014). Instead I took with me a small notebook so that I could take notes unobtrusively during the tour.

Consistent with the oral history approach upon which farm life history is based, more than one interview was conducted with each farmer or farming couple. Follow-up interviews took place between one and five months after the tours. Given that this article focuses only on
the utility of farm tours for initiating farm life histories, reference to the follow-up interviews is made only where it throws light on this topic.

My reflections are organized according to two features of the farm tours conducted in this Australian study: using motorized transport for farm tours and travelling while talking.

Truck journeys: Using motorized transport for farm tours

Riley’s (2010) use of mobile interviews was a product of methodological serendipity. In contrast, I deliberately included mobile interviews by requesting a farm tour in the original invitation to farmers to participate in the research. I made no other specific requests with regard to how the tours would be conducted, preferring to subtly delegate these decisions to my farmer informants in the interests of creating more participant-directed research encounters.

In most cases, I was invited to journey around the farms by motorized transport: thirty-two tours were completed in a farm truck, three tours used another form of motorized transport (e.g., farm quad motorbike), and six tours were on foot. Motorized transport as the predominant means of journeying around farms contrasts starkly with Riley’s on-farm interviews which involved walking and/or working around the farm. This difference in the way that farm tours were conducted has practical and ethical implications.

In a practical sense, travelling in farm trucks enabled the full extent of large properties to be visited and it allowed for research encounters to include visits to non-contiguous blocks of land that required access via public roads. The large size of many of the farms in the sample (the largest was 720 hectares) made walking an impractical mode of transportation that, had it been used for all of the tours, would have prohibited reaching many farm boundaries, subsequently limiting an understanding of how multiple land parcels were organized as a single farm enterprise.
From an ethical perspective, motorized transport enhanced the participant-directed nature of the research approach. As mentioned above, my farmer informants selected the mode of transportation for the farm tours. Their preference for using the farm truck is unsurprising because in Australia this is typically how farmers travel around their farms on a daily basis. None of them deliberated over their decision about how to travel around their farm, suggesting that their choice of transportation was either the one with which they were most comfortable or the one they considered most appropriate for showing me their farm. In either case, allowing them to choose how we travelled likely reduced the formality of being interviewed and created a research encounter that was more fitting to the farm context.

Travelling in vehicles also disrupted traditional researcher-researched power dynamics that typically place control of the encounter with the researcher. Delegating to farmers the decision about how to travel had a cumulative effect, significantly shifting control towards participants for the full duration of the tour. This shift can be illustrated by contrasting Riley’s (2010) reflections about the advantages of walking around farms with my experiences of travelling in farm trucks. He notes when walking the researcher is able to influence the tempo of the interview, not just verbally, but also physically by adjusting his/her walking speed, or even stopping altogether. If the researcher wants to move the conversation onto new topics, subtly starting to walk again provides an opportunity for changing the focus of the conversation. Similarly, if the researcher wants the participant to elaborate further upon a topic, he/she can unobtrusively slow their pace or even stop and turn to face the participant.

My experiences during the small number of tours that were walked were consistent with Riley’s evaluation. In the case of the motorized farm tours, my ability to influence the research encounters in similar ways was inhibited because control of the interview tempo was almost entirely determined to the farmer who was driving. For example, the short 45-minute
duration of one farm tour was largely a reflection of the participant driving continuously, making it difficult for me to probe topics of interest at particular places because we had literally moved on to another part of the farm with new visual triggers before I could do so. The use of a farm quad motorbike for one tour pointed to alternative modes of motorized transport providing a compromise between being able to complete full farm tours on larger properties, but restricting the speed with which the tour proceeded. In this case, the noise of the bike forced us to stop in order to talk to each other as the farmer pointed out things of interest and provided explanations. Thus, as in the case of tours that were walked, I was able to influence when the tour continued by either asking further questions or suggesting we move on because our moving was temporarily halted.

The implication for researchers is that there can be much variety in the depth of information generated during motorized farm tours which, unlike sedentary in-depth interviews, could not always be remedied verbally by asking more probing questions. Simply passing through the landscape more quickly than on foot moved conversations along more quickly which, at times, left fewer opportunities to explore topics in detail, a deficiency that highlights the benefit of including multiple interviews. Returning at a later date to explore more extensively each farm life history lessened this potential shortcoming of travelling in vehicles. Travelling while talking held other benefits for my farmer informants and me as the researcher that can be attributed to the different micro-geography created inside vehicles.

**Truck journeys: Travelling while talking**

Elwood and Martin (2000, 655) defined the ‘micro-geographies’ of research encounters as the “the sociospatial relations” constructed by places in which interviews are conducted; “in different locations, participants are situated differently … Consequently, interview participants may offer different kinds of information.” Different micro-geographies are created while travelling around farms because the spatial arrangements between the
researcher and the interviewee are re-organized to being alongside one another rather than being opposite one another as often happens in sedentary interviews (Anderson 2004; Brown and Durrheim 2009; Riley 2010).

From the perspective of the researcher – a 30-year old female – these alternative arrangements assisted with “getting into” and “getting along” in the field (Lofland and Lofland 1995, 4). Talking while sitting in vehicles facing forward helped to smooth my first interactions with farmers, the majority of whom were middle-aged men. My request to tour their farms was generally well received by my farmer informants because showing visitors (e.g., extended family, friends, bank managers, agri-consultants) around their farms was a more common occurrence than participating in formal research interviews. In this way, farm tours were a more relaxed and familiar means to enter each farm and meet each participant.

Although, farm tours are likely to be a familiar activity for many farmers, showing a social researcher around is likely to be less familiar. Thus successfully establishing credibility and developing a rapport with each farmer were important aspects of getting along in the field (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Farm tours were invaluable for these purposes. For example, one farmer seemed unsure about where and how to begin the tour. In an effort to provide sufficient, but not too much direction, I asked him if we could visit each of his land holdings. We began our journey and the initial awkwardness seemed to be lessened because we had somewhere to go and each of us could look out the window. Not more than 10 minutes into the tour, though, the uneasiness in the vehicle dramatically changed. Our first stop was the field/paddock in which his dairy cattle were grazing. His herd was dominated by Jersey cows, the less common breed of cattle among farmers in the region, so I asked him ‘Have you always had Jerseys?’ I was curious about this and keen to generate a smoother conversation, but I did not anticipate the positive impact of my question upon the remainder of the tour. The farmer responded with surprise that I had identified the breed of cattle he
kept: ‘How did you know they were Jerseys?’ he asked. His question allowed me to reciprocate briefly the sharing of information; specifically, that my grandfather, a dairy farmer, had kept Jersey cattle. My farming background seemed to establish a point of connection with this farmer and, from that point on, our conversation flowed more freely. Of course, a researcher can reciprocate the sharing of information in traditional interview formats but, in this case, I was able to unobtrusively reveal my farming background through an event that was a product of travelling around the participant’s farm. This opportunity was unlikely to have arisen had the interview taken place indoors because farmers’ choice of cattle breeds was not a specific focus of the study. Out on the farm though, an incidental event – encountering the Jersey cattle – provided an incidental path to follow that helped the researcher and participant settle into the research encounter. Thus, incidental paths that develop from travelling around farms not only provide opportunities to explore unanticipated dimensions of the research topic, as Riley (2010) reports, but they also enhance the efficacy of research encounters more generally.

Situations like that described above made it clear to me that farm tours were of most benefit to the researcher if they began as soon as possible after arriving at the farm. At another farm, I accepted an invitation for a cup of tea inside the farmers’ home before touring the farm. I sat with the farming couple around their dining room table. After introducing the research, our conversation proceeded in a question-and-answer format and it was difficult to encourage in-depth responses from them. Despite the stilted nature of this initial conversation, once the three of us were sitting in their single-cab farm truck, they spoke more freely about their farm operation as they explained to me the history of their land holdings and aspirations for their farm. Upon my return visit, I was welcomed much less hesitantly, resulting in a more comfortable interaction than the initial conversation around their dining room table.
In both these cases, and many others, it is not possible to separate the potential influence of talking while being alongside one another from other dynamics created by being out on the farm. Nevertheless, the different combinations of socio-spatial relations created during each farm tour positively contributed to my entering and getting along in the field. The socio-spatial relations created during motorized farm tours also offer benefits to research participants.

From the perspective of farm participants, talking while out on the farm potentially provided a context in which they felt more comfortable talking about their enterprises, assisting them in accessing and sharing their knowledge. Similarly, the micro-geography produced in farm trucks created moments during interviews when farmers seemed to reflect more deeply than at times when they were driving. These moments occurred at the end of some farm tours. We had returned to our starting point (usually the farmer’s residence), the engine was turned off, actions that might have signaled the completion of the tour and interview. But, in several cases, we remained sitting in the vehicle while the interview continued. One instance involved a farmer who was somewhat reserved when I spoke with him on the telephone to schedule the tour, but while sitting in the vehicle outside his house, he volunteered important information about how his inheritance of the farm, and how the transitioning of land ownership from his parents, had been managed. His father’s will required that he inherit the farm, providing he met certain financial obligations to his non-farming siblings. He provided further context to his narrative by describing the recent “soul destroying” drought that had challenged his financial ability to adhere to his father’s will. During this time, the mood inside the vehicle was one of somber reflection that seemed to be the product of having travelled around the farm, of being seated alongside each other, and having cut the engine. These moments of reflection ended only when we got out of the vehicle.
Although, it is impossible to know whether the farmer would have been forthcoming with this narrative had a more traditional interview been conducted around the farmer’s kitchen table, the fact that this information was not revealed earlier points to the possibility that talking while travelling in vehicles creates space for different kinds of information to be generated (Brown and Durrheim 2009). The socio-spatial characteristics of the farm truck rendered it a place for deeper reflection on the part of the farmers involved, free from common distractions when conducting interviews in farmers’ homes (e.g., phone calls, making of tea/coffee). At these times, the focus was not on farm boundaries or even the landscape, but rather the articulation of a set of ideas.

This example does not negate the role of visual cues for prompting conversation, one of the key justifications for conducting mobile interviews. Other researchers favorably report the ways in which triggers in the landscape prompt conversations during mobile interviews (Anderson 2004; Brown and Durrheim 2009; Riley and Harvey 2007). Missing from these accounts is a more nuanced perspective about the effectiveness of different landscapes in prompting conversation.

The inclusion of two farming regions with differing topographies in this study revealed that not all landscapes equally mediate and trigger conversations. One region was an irrigation district located on a river plain where an extensive, flat landscape offered few vantage points. During some tours in this region, farmers would gesture towards a high point in a paddock, subtle differences in the irrigated landscape that to the untrained eye were often difficult to discern. The lack of vantage points from which to view the landscape and farm boundaries constrained the way in which the landscape prompted conversation when compared to the landscape of the second study site.

The topography in the second farming region was varied, rolling hill country, offering many vantage points from which the farm, its boundaries and the surrounding landscape
could be viewed. During one tour, the farmer stopped the truck at a place where we could look out over his farm; from there, he was able to point out in the distance a particular row of trees that showed the boundary between one land parcel and another. This boundary represented an important juncture in the development of his farm that explained how his business came to be a partnership between two generations of his family. The farmer explained that the land on the near side of the trees was his father’s original farm, and the land on the far side was available for purchase in the 1980s at which time his father invited him to join the farm business and participate in the expansion of the farm through the acquisition of this adjoining land. He declined his father’s offer and embarked on a city-based career. Later, he returned, intending to establish his own farm business. By then, the availability of land in close proximity to his father’s land at this same time resulted in them forming a larger, multi-generational partnership. Such connections between landscape and narrative occurred more frequently on farms where the geography facilitated the identification of landmarks, suggesting that the effectiveness of different landscapes to trigger research conversations might be highly variable.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have responded to Woods’ (2012) observation that there is scope within rural geography for greater critique and reflection upon methodological innovation and the practice of rural research. If novel methodologies and data generation techniques are to be added to the suite of approaches available to rural geographers, they need to allow customization for different research problems. In this spirit, rather than contributing to the growing literature that evaluates the use of mobile interviews in diverse research contexts, this article has added depth to the literature concerning the use of these techniques to investigate farm-level change. Importantly, the application of farm life histories initiated
through farm tours to an investigation of the socio-economic organization of Australian farming has broadened the range of potential agricultural applications of this approach.

Notwithstanding this, the ways in which the benefits of mobile interviews are differently experienced within a single research sample, as reported here, also have utility for non-rural/agricultural researchers. Specifically, the practical and ethical implications of different modes of transportation need to be carefully evaluated, including the cumulative effects of who decides how the researcher and participant will travel, and the effectiveness of the material aspects of landscapes used to prompt conversation. These dynamics within individual research encounters create much variation in the ways in which the benefits of emplacing mobile interviews are realized. Despite the uneven expression of these benefits across the research sample, when used in concert with traditional interviews, motorized tours vis-à-vis mobile interviews that are walked enhance the potential scalability of the approach for use in research sites larger than the relatively local scale of individual farms.
Endnotes

1 The term ‘truck’ as used here refers to vehicles commonly used for work purposes on Australian farms. Colloquially, they are often referred to as ‘the farm truck’ or ‘the farm ute’ (abbreviation of farm utility vehicle). These vehicles typically have a single or twin passenger cabin and a cargo tray in the rear. Comparable American terminology might be ‘pick-up truck’.
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Author Note

ERIN F. SMITH is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Sustainability Research Centre, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. E-mail: esmith2@usc.edu.au. Erin completed the research reported in this article while she was a PhD candidate in the School of Geosciences, The University of Sydney, Australia. Her research interests include rural restructuring, the socio-economic organization of farming, and land and water ownership.
Figure 1A

Map of Australia showing the state of Victoria (shaded)