

Social perspectives on farmer suicide CC and rural health in Australia

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While the act of suicide may be an individual one,
the pathway to suicide is inherently socially constructed

Hegemonic masculinity as central issues

- Identity narrowly defined (Lankester 2011)
- Performative in nature (Moore 1994)
- Psychologically inflexible (Hayes et al 1999)
- Precipitating destabilisation thru dissonance (Barr 2009 & Alston 2010)
- Evidenced in uncertainty and anxiety (Giddens 1991, Erickson 1965 & Hogan 2001)
- Durkheim (2002) - why some suicide but not others
- Convergence (Hogan 2001)

Farmers and hegemonic masculinity

- head of the family
- responsible for the continuance of the farming family dynasty.
- self worth centred on ability to do
- rugged individualist, tough and uncompromising
- in control
- a knowledgeable outdoor farm labourer
- having control over land and stock
- stoic and tenacious in the face of challenges
- caretaker of the land
- a big deal in town, council boards etc

Farmers and hegemonic masculinity



Being a successful man is
about successful farming (Alston 2010)

Precipitating destabilisation – losing of the legitimacy and the capacity to do

- Too many small farms
- FTA/Deregulation/globalisation
- Rising costs; falling prices
- ‘Oversupply’ of food in western economies
- Compressing terms of trade 3% p.a.
- Getting big or getting out
- Contested social licence
- Drought, drying and climate change
- The Basin Plan

The incentives to stay

- Age
- Investment – economic and skills
- The farm as super fund
- The cost to retool
- The cost to retrain
- Loss of social status



Barriers to change

- Psychological inflexibility
- Cognitive fusion
- Experiential avoidance
- Excessive goals

Psychological inflexibility

- Not connected with the current realities (worrying, ruminating, preoccupied, auto-pilot, going thru the emotions)
- Experiential avoidance
 - Avoidance of unpleasant emotions
 - Not addressing key issues & experiences
 - Use of alcohol/self harm

Psychological inflexibility

- Cognitive fusion – rigid rules, self limiting beliefs, unrealistic expectations; harsh judgments, reasoning, being right
- Fused with strong but narrowly defined self image

Excessive goals

- Personal perceptions of viability
- Episodic hope



Fusion

You emotionally connect with the many thoughts running thru your head and FEAR results

Fusion (stuff your mind tells you that gets in the way when you get emotionally caught up in it)

Excessive goals (your goal is too big, or you lack the skills, or you lack the resources)

Avoidance of discomfort (unwillingness to make room for the discomfort this challenge brings)

Remoteness from values (losing touch with - or forgetting - what is important or meaningful about this or my life)

FEAR

Tri-Level reaction

Emotions

- Shame, sadness or grief
- Fear of failure/rejection/stupidity
- Flight/fight
- Anger, Impatience or hate
- Embarrassment & Isolation
- Personal Invalidation
- Stigma/prejudice
- Worry & anxiety - what's my future?

FUSION

Lots of Physical Reactions

- Pupils dilate
- Saliva flow inhibited
- Heart beats faster
- Blood pressure may increase
- Bronchi dilates
- Adrenal gland secretes
- Digestion slows
- Liver puts sugar into the system
- More sweat
- Kidneys inhibited
- Peripheral blood vessels constrict
- Increased strength to muscles



Which we see manifest in everyday behaviours and reactions

Continuums in identity

Predicability Flexible	↔ ↔	Uncertainty Seeking to control
Identity Broadly based	↔ ↔	Role confusion Fused with ideal types
Competent Proud	↔ ↔	Incompetent/inferior Controlling/Passing/bluffing
Intimacy Connected	↔ ↔	Isolation Disconnected
Self worth Internal control	↔ ↔	Shame Avoidance behaviours
Getting on Real participation	↔ ↔	Stagnation Bonsai-ed
Integrity Grounded	↔ ↔	Despair Fused/stuck

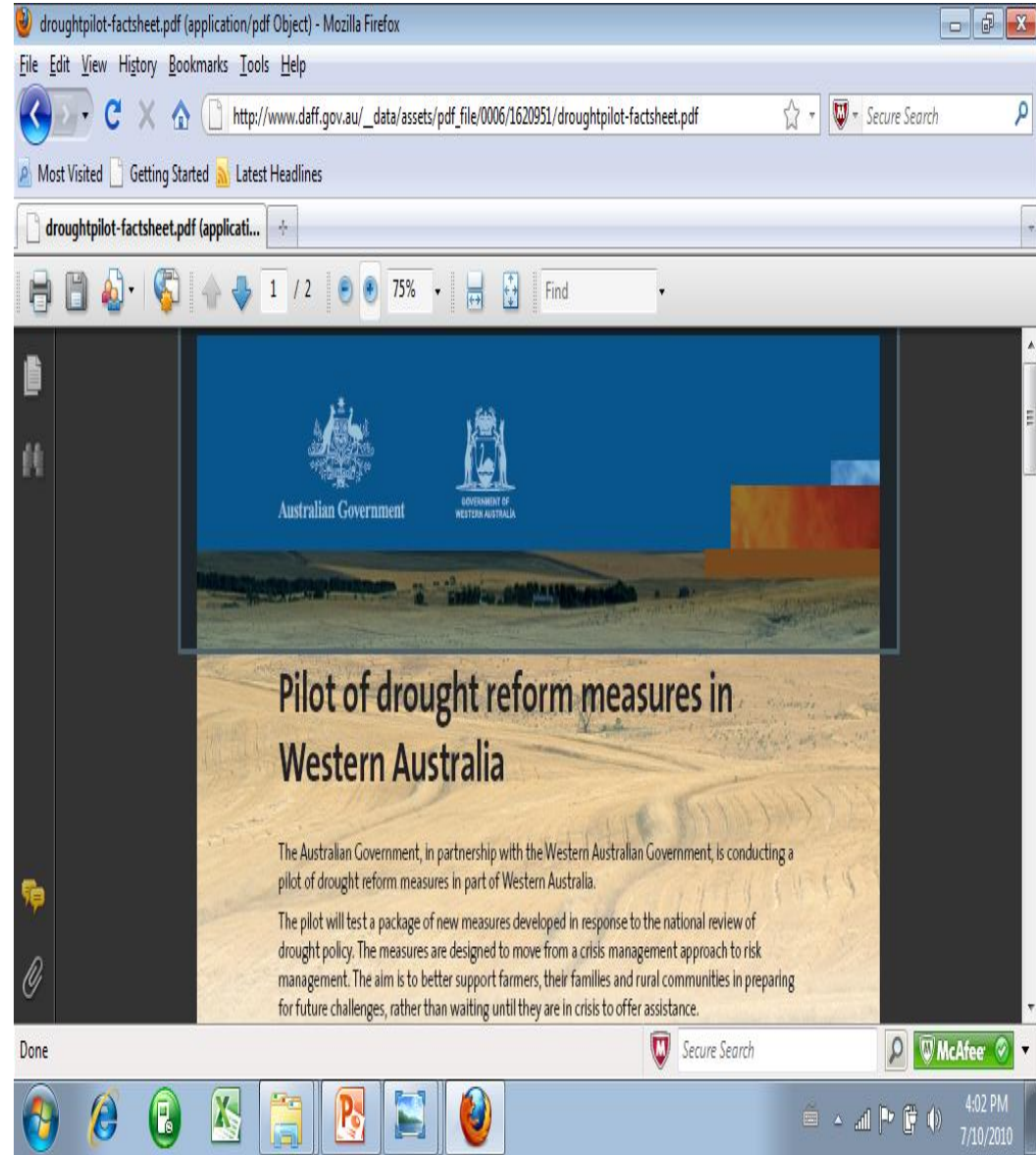
Dynamic personal reactions

Farmer suicide is real

- At least 50% higher than urban male suicide
- 8% increase in suicide related to each loss of 300mm of rain

Kenny Report

- Community distress associated
- Less time for community
- Gradual process of disconnecting
- Distress related to farm and livestock losses
- Misperception and reluctance



The will to suicide

- Egoistic tendencies:
 - Self possessed in thoughts – lost in dreams
 - Strong narrow sense of personal identity
 - Social role gives life purpose and meaning
- Anomic tendencies:
 - Life is boundless – can live outside the usual rules
 - Lived out passions beyond every day structures of social life
 - Pursued aspirations as they wanted to – unregulated life
 - Difficult to deal with everyday frustrations

Arising risk of suicide

- Foundations of firmly but narrowly held identity and meaning collapse
- Personal script of how they saw themselves in the world no longer works
- Social values change
- Events intersect & destabilisation occurs
- Experience fall from grace/shame/loss of status
- Sense of injustice

Entering the anomic state

- Tipping point – the breach
- Normlessness
- Enduring sense of uncertainty – lost predictability
- Fear of social interactions
- Hypersensitivity to difficult situations
- Loss of self confidence
- Shock paralysis response

Will to suicide

- Realities of the everyday make personal fulfilment seem impossible
- No satisfaction can be found in pursuing the unobtainable
 - Life doesn't meet my needs
- Increasing effort only produces further losses
- No purpose to justify life's trials
- See no value in the life one could live
 - How could the will to live not be weakened under such conditions (Durkheim) ???

Distinct social pressures

Predisposing

- Strong personal identity
- Distinct social role underpinned by strong folk lore
- Role specific social connectivity
- Live outside the rules of dominant society
- Unregulated life
- Passions for life lived outside ready restrictions of social structure

Precipitating

- Collapse of meaning system - shift in social values
- Loss of status or social position of the threat of
- Shame associated with the self perceived/ actual fall from grace
- Sense of injustice
- Feeling invalidated
- Thwarted aspirations

Mediating

- Increasing uncertainty and its cumulative impact on ego integrity
- Fear
- Increasing sense of embarrassment
- Hypersensitivity to specific issues or situations
- Socially withdrawing - disconnecting
- Reluctance and misperception



Triggering Event



Means of Suicide

Insights for prevention

- Learning to be affected
 - Maieutic process
 - Recognising what has been happening
 - Defusing
- Recognising unworkability of the farm in a constructive way
 - It's the farm not me
 - Letting go of control – OK not knowing what comes next
 - Prepared to try other peoples' ideas
- Identity based change
 - Finding new ways of valid living – being successful

Insights for prevention

- Engaging programs
- Three step sensitization program
 - Recognising being affected – gradual defusion
 - Understanding being affected
 - Planning for gradual change
 - Small realistic steps
 - Living with the limits of structured life

