



“Watching the bank balance build up then blow away and the rain clouds do the same”: A thematic analysis of South Australian farmers’ sources of stress during drought



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ABSTRACT

Background/aims/method: To investigate causes of farmers’ stress during drought, 309 drought-affected South Australian farmers and their spouses, mainly from sheep, cattle and/or gain properties, ranging in age from 23 to 85 years (34.6% female) completed a questionnaire. Demographic and work-related details were collected and participants were asked to list their most stressful experiences in the past month and past 12 months.

Results: Most (73.1%) of the sources of stress reported were farm-related. A thematic analysis identified drought, financial pressure and uncertainty about the future as dominant stressors. A range of other more specific drought-related (e.g. poor crop yields, unsatisfactory conditions for livestock, overwhelming workloads) and contextual stressors (e.g. rising input costs, family involvement in the farming business, pressure to take part in community work, lack of understanding of farming from ‘outsiders’) were also identified. Dominant stressors were compounded by non-drought-related issues (e.g. machinery breakdowns) and non-farm related stressors (e.g. illness and death of loved ones).

Conclusion: Improved awareness of stressors may help to reduce farmers’ frustration with outsiders’ lack of understanding of their way of life, normalise stressors and thereby reduce stigma and empower farmers to seek help. These findings could also inform the development of targeted mental-health prevention and promotion initiatives for farmers in future periods of drought.

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1. Introduction

Farming is both a physically (Franklin et al., 2001; Kennedy et al., 2014) and psychologically hazardous occupation (Gregoire, 2002; Edwards et al., 2009; Schirmer et al., 2015), resulting in high levels of stress (Booth and Lloyd, 2000; Walker and Walker, 1987;

Schirmer et al., 2015; Brumby et al., 2013), depression and anxiety among farmers (Eisner, Neal & Scaife, 1998 cited in Fraser et al., 2005). Previous studies have also found that farmers are more vulnerable to suicide than the general population (Andersen et al., 2010; Berry et al., 2010; Page and Fragar, 2002; Kennedy et al., 2014).

There are several reasons farming is distinct from many other occupations and worthy of specific research. A unique characteristic of this sector is that the farm is generally both a farmer’s workplace and home (Fraser et al., 2005; Gray and Lawrence, 1996; Gregoire, 2002; Lunner Kolstrup et al., 2013; Sartore et al., 2008). This is thought to have implications for farmers’ mental-health as many view farming not only as an occupation but also as a lifestyle, resulting in work, home and family roles being intertwined (Fraser

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et al., 2005; Gregoire, 2002). In addition, farm work is physically strenuous (Fraser et al., 2005). It often requires working long hours in a variety of weather and light conditions (Gerrard, 1998), the use of dangerous machinery (Roufeil and Lipzker, 2007) and frequent exposure to chemicals (Gerrard, 1998), often in the absence of adequate safety measures (Carruth and Logan, 2002). Farm work is also complex, involving substantial financial investments and risks (Walker and Walker, 1987), large amounts of paperwork (Gregoire, 2002) and a number of forces beyond farmers' control such as changes in weather, commodity markets and government regulations (Fraser et al., 2005; Roufeil and Lipzker, 2007). Further, as most farms are family-owned and operated businesses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Carruth and Logan, 2002; Barclay et al., 2011) and often involve family members from across different generations (Rosenblatt and Anderson, 1981 cited in Walker and Walker, 1987), business and personal issues frequently fuse (Ben-nett, 1982 and Kohl, 1976 cited in Weigel et al., 1987). Of the 129 934 individual farming businesses in Australia, 99% are family-owned and operated (Heffernan et al., 2008). Therefore, intergenerational family conflict over roles and problems with the transition of farm ownership are thought to be common causes of stress among farmers (Wheeler et al., 2012; Barclay et al., 2011).

In South Australia where the present research was conducted, during the 2012–2013 financial year approximately 13 000 farms were in operation, producing goods worth \$5.2 billion to the local economy (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). At the time of data collection (2008), 14 900 farms were in operation in South Australia and 33 000 South Australians were employed in *direct farm jobs* (National Farmers Federation, 2008).

The reasons farming is different from other occupations (outlined previously) are well documented in the literature and these issues clearly affect a significant number of people. However, despite acknowledgment that *causes* of farm-related stress are dynamic and appear to be different during drought (Berry et al., 2011; Berry et al., 2008), less attention has been paid to the specific causes of farmers' stress during these difficult periods. Drought is thought to be associated with mental health problems as well as predisposing adversities such as financial pressure, which further contribute to poor mental health (Berry et al., 2008; Sartore et al., 2008; Stanke et al., 2013). A link between drought in New South Wales (NSW) and suicide of farmers has also been identified (Berry et al., 2008). While it is evident that drought has enduring negative consequences on farmers' mental and social health, there is currently a lack of research detailing exactly why this is so (Alston, 2004; Caldwell and Boyd, 2009; Dijk et al., 2013). Previous research that has identified farmers' stressors has predominantly been undertaken outside Australia and generally not in times of drought. Page and Fragar (2002) note the differences between Australian, North American and European agriculture (for example in production systems and economic subsidization), and warn that care should be taken when applying trends found elsewhere to Australian farmers. The obvious exceptions to the lack of local, recent research are our own report on coping strategies farmers use during drought (Gunn et al., 2012) collected from the same participant pool as that reported on in this paper, a qualitative study on what makes some farmers resilient during drought (Greenhill et al., 2009), a study on South Australian citrus growers (Staniford et al., 2009) and the study on the effects of the drought on two rural communities in NSW (Sartore et al., 2007). However, the present study focuses more specifically on the effects of drought on farmers who are mainly involved in grain, sheep and cattle production and sources of stress rather than coping strategies. It is necessary to address this gap in the literature to better understand and mitigate the negative effects of stress on farmers' health during future droughts. As van Dijk et al. (2013) explain, "Key

causative pathways from physical drought to the degradation of ecological, economic, and social health remain poorly understood and quantified ... this means future droughts may well break records in ever new ways and not necessarily be managed better than past ones" (p. 1040).

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to identify the factors that specifically cause farmers stress in times of drought. For the purposes of this study, a *farmer* is considered anyone who owns and takes an active role in the operation of a farming or pastoral enterprise in South Australia, or someone who is the partner of a person fitting this description. This broad definition has been adopted as stress associated with farm life affects not only farmers, but also their families (Carruth and Logan, 2002; Fraser et al., 2005). A recent systematic review of the health effects of drought recently concluded that there is a need for more systematic reporting of the impacts of drought (Stanke et al., 2013); a gap this paper helps to fill.

It is anticipated that these findings will assist in the development of practical interventions to support this unique population when the need arises, as well as interventions aimed at 'drought proofing' farmers in readiness for future droughts. Identifying specific sources of stress may also inform evidence-based approaches to help improve mental health (Polain et al., 2011; Sartore et al., 2008) and prevent suicide in this at-risk group (Lunnen Kolstrup et al., 2013). Increases in extreme weather events, specifically frequent, severe droughts, are expected in the future¹ (Berry et al., 2010; Berry et al., 2008; Costello et al., 2009; Pachauri et al., 2014), underscoring the urgency of these research outcomes.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

Data were collected via a self-report questionnaire that was available in printed, faxed and online form. This data collection method was selected based on feedback from farmers who met the selection criteria, that workloads were exceptionally heavy, they had to prioritise farm work and asking them to take time away from work, family and community commitments to participate in interviews would add to their levels of stress. However, providing them with a questionnaire to complete at their leisure was considered more acceptable, as well as more feasible given our very limited budget.

Questionnaires were sent to all members of the South Australian Farmers Federation (SAFF)² by post, fax or email depending on members' preferred mode of communication. Four weeks prior to this, a forewarning notice was placed in the monthly SAFF *Member Update* newsletter in an effort to improve response rates (Cole et al., 2007). After ethics approval was granted from The University of Adelaide's School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Committee, a covering letter from SAFF, information sheet and survey were sent to the households of potential participants. Members who received the questionnaire and accompanying materials via fax or

¹ This also increases the risk of bushfires, which add another layer of complexity to stress associated with drought (Whittaker et al., 2012).

² At the time of research, SAFF was South Australia's leading lobbying organisation representing South Australian farmers. However it has recently been renamed Primary Producers SA, which (like SAFF) lobbies on overarching issues facing South Australian farmers (e.g. drought relief). Although the percentage of South Australian farmers that belonged to SAFF was known to SAFF staff, they did not wish to declare this information. However, they were able to provide assurance that their members were representative of cereal and livestock farmers in South Australia at the time this research was conducted.

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