



Beyond discourses of drought: The micro-politics of the wine industry and farmer distress

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A B S T R A C T

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Farmer suicides have led to a problematization of the mental health of farmers against the backdrop of farming as an occupation. In Australia, the dominant discursive framework shaping this problematization is one of 'drought stress' constituted through a positivist empiricism and 'psy' discourses of mental health. The contours of this dominant framework operate to limit other possible renderings of farmer suicide and narrow the frame of appropriate response. In particular, this framework marginalizes political, economic and cultural dimensions relevant to understanding farmer suicide. This paper draws on theoretical and empirical resources to disrupt the dominant discourse of 'drought stress'. The study on which it is based involved in-depth interviews with primary producers of wine grapes and was initiated by the Wine Grape Growers Association in the context of concerns about the social and economic effects of drought. What emerged during the interviews however, were issues arising from agri-business. This paper engages with Foucault's analyses of neoliberal political economy to explore the micro-politics of the wine industry within the broader regulatory apparatus of agriculture. It considers how the state and corporate agriculture constrain autonomy, economic conditions and the ability of farmers to continue to farm thereby creating distress and at times suicide. From this perspective, the paper argues that farmer's suicides are rendered political and warrant interventions which go beyond the individual and beyond the external and almost insurmountable conditions of drought and climate change.

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1. Introduction

Internationally the phenomenon of farmer suicides has led to a problematization of the mental health of farmers against the backdrop of farming as an occupation. According to statistics, male farmers are disproportionately at risk of suicide (Guiney, 2012; Judd et al., 2006; Page and Fragar, 2002). The social science literature has long been concerned with occupational stressors of farming linked to the natural environment and uncontrollable factors such as weather conditions and disease which can affect production and economic viability (e.g. Firth et al., 2007; Gregoire, 2002; Staniford et al., 2009). In the Australian literature, drought is considered a key determinant of poor mental health and a defining feature of explanations for increases in farmer suicides (e.g. Alston, 2012; Alston and Kent, 2008; Berry et al., 2011; Fragar et al., 2008; Guiney, 2012; Hanna et al., 2011; Judd et al., 2006).

The way in which the problem of farmer suicides has been framed within the social science literature enables particular

understandings of suicide and its prevention to emerge. This framework and understandings of farmer suicides constitute a particular 'problematization'. As Rose (1996: 26) explains, problematization refers to "practices where conduct has become problematic to others or oneself" and the attempts to "render these problems intelligible and, at the same time, manageable". In the social sciences, suicide research is largely positivist and framed through 'psy' discourses of mental illness and psychological stress. 'Psy' discourses refer to the knowledge and practices generated by the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry that dominate our understanding of self-hood (Rose, 1996). These discourses shape understandings of suicide in terms of individual mental illness, particularly depression, and correlate this with intentional self-harm and suicide. This particular rendering of risk for suicide provides the basis for the state to respond through pastoral apparatus intended to intervene in mental health and suicide prevention.

Whilst making an important contribution to knowledge of suicide, this dominant positivist and psychological framework also operates to limit and exclude other possible renderings of farmer suicide and thus narrow the frame of appropriate response. Through quantitative methodologies much of the social science literature reduces social and economic dimensions of experience to

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'factors' influencing depression and suicide. Moreover, this framework marginalizes political and cultural dimensions relevant to understanding farmer suicide. Following Price and Evans (2005: 45, 2009), we argue that mental health approaches "tend to focus on the dramatic outcome of processes of stress in the form of suicide rather than the dynamics of social processes themselves which form the underlying causes of stress". As these authors have demonstrated, what is needed are conceptualizations of 'distress' that are empirically grounded within the culture of farming as 'a way of life' that enable examination of the ways in which subjective, social and cultural dimensions can contribute to distress in farming families (Price and Evans, 2009). To complicate and extend the dominant Australian discursive framework of 'drought stress,' this paper draws on theoretical and empirical resources to explore farmer distress arising from economic and political issues. The study on which it is based involved in-depth interviews with primary producers of wine grapes in the Riverland of South Australia during 2005. The study was initiated by the Wine Grape Growers Association and funded by the State Government in the context of concerns about the social and economic effects of the then current drought. What emerged during the interviews however, were issues emanating from agri-business involving farmers, transnational wine corporations and the state.

To analyse the micro-politics of the wine industry within the broader regulatory apparatus of agriculture, this paper engages with Foucault's analyses of neoliberal political economy. There have been a series of scholarly articles in rural studies noting a retreat from political economy approaches as scholars turn to Actor Network Theory or other post-structural analyses to understand the political and economic contexts in which agriculture is shaped (Phillips, 2002; Wilkinson, 2006). However, this does not suggest methodological monism within rural studies or diminish the methodological strengths of political economy approaches. As Woods (2012) and others have noted, current themes in rural studies, including climate change, will require a reassertion of political-economy analyses. Drawing on Foucault's work on neoliberal political economy enables an analysis of the political, economic and social contexts that both delimit and provide possibilities for agency. This paper considers how the state and corporate agriculture constrain autonomy, economic conditions and ability of farmers to continue to farm thereby creating distress. Such an approach opens up analyses of farming suicides to allow us to consider interventions which go beyond the individual and beyond the external and almost insurmountable conditions of drought and climate change.

1.1. Problematizing drought stress

Over the last decade as rural suicide statistics have increased so too has academic attention on rural men and suicide, particularly within the health sciences and sociology. The majority of studies purport that rural suicide among farming men has grown significantly in proportion to reported suicides of men in this same age cohort in urban areas in Australia, the United Kingdom, the US, India and South Korea for example (Caldwell et al., 2004; Sankaranarayanan et al., 2010). Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) show that for men, the standardized death rate from suicide was higher in rural areas compared to metro areas for all Australian States. Farming men, particularly those aged between 30 and 59 years, represent approximately 95% of rural suicides occurring in the most drought ridden rural states like Victoria (Guiney, 2012). When Judd et al. (2006: 41) reported that, 'In Australia, approximately one male farmer dies from suicide every 4 days, a rate this is significantly higher than that of non-farming rural men and of the general male population', this statistic

reverberated across the nation through wide spread media reporting and extensive utilization in academic research.

Scholars have argued that over the last decade, prolonged periods of drought have threatened farm viability and the social identity of farm men. Men generally and older men specifically are considered to be more at risk of suicide than women and younger men. Older men were said to be more at risk because their masculinity is closely tied to their history and heritage in farming and their role as breadwinner (Alston, 2007, 2011; King et al., 2009). It has been further argued that the emotional conditions associated with their masculinity which requires stoicism and resilience thereby means that farming men are less likely to seek medical and psychological assistance (Alston, 2007, 2011; King et al., 2009). This literature on 'drought stress' is gender biased and farming women remain largely absent from the literature on distress (Price and Evans, 2005) and studies focused on suicide, suicide ideation and risk of suicide in farming.

Australian communities in drought were also the most economically vulnerable (Hart et al., 2011), hence, the long drought, referred to as 'the big dry', resulted in escalated debt, reduced farm income, fallen land values and therefore difficulty in both remaining in farming and selling farming properties (Guiney, 2012; Polain et al., 2011). Scholars have also pointed to compounding factors like the ageing of the workforce inhibiting possibilities for succession and retirement and increases in fuel price driving further increases to the cost of farm inputs (Fragar et al., 2008; Polain et al., 2011). Moreover, limited social services infrastructure in rural communities and the drained emotional reserve of community members to care for each other, have also compounded stress and poor mental health (Alston, 2011; Berry, 2009). Berry et al. (2011: 1245) have suggested that farmers experiencing long term exposure to uncontrollable stress, such as that caused by weather conditions, are likely to have deteriorating mental health which in part explains increases in suicide. Others have argued that male farmers under stress who are likely to attempt suicide are more likely to succeed given their accessibility to firearms (Guiney, 2012). As a consequence of the economic, climatic and social conditions in Australian farming it is not surprising that mental health would be comprised in rural Australia. However, reiterated across the literature are causal and often circumstantial connections between mental health and indeed suicide and drought.

Whilst drought is an important consideration, a reductive focus on drought has excluded examination of multiple contexts for increased suicide and has limited intervention strategies. Whilst the political economy of agriculture has been acknowledged in studies of rural suicide, few have drawn upon this immense body of knowledge or have empirically explicated the political and economic contexts in which poor mental health has occurred to understand farmer suicide. Drought affected farms are also networked within corporate agriculture. In some cases, like for grape growers in Southern Australia, the area worst hit by drought, growers' contracts are tied to prices paid by multinationals and water allocations set by the State (Bryant et al., 2006; Eriksen et al., 2010). These structural conditions constrain farmer's autonomy and are a source of distress (Bryant et al., 2006). However, the question of suicide and political economy is complex and it might be that farmers enact agency even in the advent of the tragic circumstances of suicide. International scholarship on farmer suicide for instance, draws attention to the ways in which suicide can be read as a political act, to communicate both powerlessness and power to the State (Münster, 2012). This paper will explore the micro-politics experienced by wine grape growers in relation to understanding distress by drawing on insights from Foucault's analyses of political economy and rural studies literature on neo-liberalism and farming.

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