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**RUPTURED IDENTITY OF MALE FARMERS:
SUBJECTIVE CRISIS AND THE RISK OF SUICIDE***

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ABSTRACT

Suicide among male farmers is frequently discussed in the literature. While a wide range of factors are associated, a coherent theoretical framework that incorporates the various factors associated with male farmer suicide has not been developed. Moreover, the insights offered to date have not opened a more systemic approach to prevention. Drawing on substantive contributions from sociological theory, this paper proposes a framework for progressing understanding of the causes of this phenomenon and offers insights for prevention. The paper argues that ontological security is central to identity and social competence, and that loss of the coherency of identity and the potential loss of a continuity of social practice result in a ruptured identity. The combined effects of reluctance to acknowledge difficulties, the misperception of one's problems, and experiences of shame contribute strongly to nihilism and the will to suicide. This framework is considered in light of case study material on suicide among Australian farmers. The paper concludes by giving consideration about how these insights may be translated into existing suicide prevention programs.

Suicide among male farmers is an international phenomenon, occurring in both western and developing countries (Ganesvaran, Subramaniam and Mahadevan 1984; Malberg, Hawton, and Simkin 1997; Page and Fragar 2002; Posani 2009; Sturgeon and Morrissette 2010; United Nations 2009). Australian data (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2007; Miller and Burns 2008) indicate that

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the suicide rate for non-indigenous males in non-metropolitan areas in Australia is 25 percent to 40 percent higher than that of males living in major cities and proportionately 48 percent higher for male farmers. AIHW (2012) has reported that males living in remote and very remote areas were twice as likely to die of suicide as males living in metropolitan areas. The age-standardized rates of suicide (deaths per 100,000 males) were 13.2 for metropolitan areas, 19.2 for outer regional areas, and 27.7 for remote and very remote areas (AIHW 2012:27). Suicide was the fifth most common cause of death for Aboriginal people, explaining in part the considerably higher rate of suicide in more remote parts of Australia (AIHW 2012).

The literature suggests that male farmer suicide is most common among specific groups of farmers. Page and Frager (2002) reported that most of the farm suicides (67.4 percent) were among male farm managers more than 55 years of age. Similar reports of suicide among men in their middle ages and notably older men can be found elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Malberg et al. 1997). This paper, and the framework we examine, is primarily concerned with suicide among this larger group of farmers. We note also reports of young male rural suicides, although less common, are quite evident in the literature, with reports common in both developing and developed countries (Biddle, Sekula, and Puskar 2010; Hirsch 2006; Kong and Ziang 2010; Morrel, Page, and Taylor 2007). Similarly, reports of female rural suicide (and attempted suicide) are also evident in the literature (e.g., Bourke 2003; Hawton and van Heeringen 2009), at times with higher rates of suicide than comparative groups of males, particularly among young people (e.g., Aaron et al. 2004; Gunnell et al. 2003).

A body of research has sought to make sense of this phenomenon, examining in turn a wide range of potential causative factors from the environment and the economy to psychosocial factors. On the environmental front, Nicholls, Butler, and Hanigan (2006) reported that decreased rainfall was correlated with suicide and Speldewinde et al. (2009) reported a correlation between changes in the physical environment (salinity) and depression. The mechanism of action, however, between these environmental stressors and suicide has not been established. For example, in an extensive review of the mental health literature, Berry et al. (2011) found that male farmer suicide is not readily explained by some unique mental disorder experienced by specific farmers. However, a range of psychosocial stressors and shocks have been associated with male farmer suicide, including: the death of stock, the loss of rural amenities, and increasing isolation (Kenny Report 2008); exposure to climate change and socioeconomic disadvantage (Berry et al. 2011); financial problems (Fuller and Broadbent 2006; Fuller et al. 2007); advanced age or farm

ownership/management (Page and Fragar 2002); personal vulnerability (Kenny Report 2008); lack of a sense of belonging (Bourke 2003); and residence in small towns (Alston 2012). Besides these factors, the literature indicates that a range of gendered factors also contribute to suicide risk. Just being male is a risk for suicide (Page and Fragar 2002), as is having a hegemonic masculine identity (Alston 2012). Similarly, a culture of self-reliance, where emotional problems are regarded as weakness (Boyd et al. 2007), and a reluctance to acknowledge problems (Miller and Burns 2008) have been associated with suicide risk.

The contribution of gendered identity in suicide, although discussed in the literature, (Alston 2012; Carrington and Scott 2008), remains unresolved and under-theorized. Alston (2012) argued that it is the destabilization of gendered identity that is central to suicide risk. However she did not explain how the process of destabilization occurs or why it is gender, *per se*, that is the critical element in driving men to suicide. Similarly, Alston's work is not situated within the broader theoretical literature. Carrington and Scott (2008) argued that it is the social architecture of rural life that inclines rural men to be more violent against both themselves and others, in the pursuit of reasserting a failing gendered social hierarchy. By contrast, Lockie, Nancarrow, and Sharma (2010, 2011) demonstrated that rural men are no more inherently violent than their urban counterparts.

We do not contest the fact that many Australian farmers have an identity steeped in hegemonic masculinity (Alston 2012; Connell 1987; Lawrence and Gray 2000; Lockie 2000). However, since significant structural factors, such as economic decline (Ragland and Berman 1990), weather patterns (Nicholls et al. 2006), and environmental changes (Speldewinde et al. 2009), have also been associated with suicide or its risk, we argue (and demonstrate in more detail below) that attempts to situate masculinity as the central factor underpinning male farmer suicide overextend the likely contribution that gender makes within a material context. While persistent or intense physical and psychological shocks can contribute to the destabilization or rupturing of identity, the nature of such shocks is not inherently gendered. Moreover, as we will argue below, faced with similar shocks to the coherency of identity, Durkheim (2002) argued that women would also take their own lives. Indeed, suicide is not a uniquely male phenomenon.

Conceptually this literature is fragmented. It lacks a theoretically-informed framework through which one can both better understand this phenomenon and work toward preventing its occurrence. It does not provide an explanation why this group of men might commit suicide in the face of specific stressors while other groups of male workers do not. For example, concerns about men's suicide have not

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been systemically raised in association with the significant loss of employment for male workers in the Australian manufacturing industry (Bureau of Rural Sciences 2008). In terms of overall risk, an elevated risk of suicide of 25 to 40 percent for being rural compared with 48 percent for being a farmer may not be that large in real terms, with a high potential for confidence intervals to overlap. To this end we argue for the need to move beyond gendered stereotypes of rural and farming men to develop a more systematic understanding of why rates of suicide among male farmers may be higher than those among other men.

We approach this question in four ways. First, we briefly review the substantive sociological theories in this area, and second, we develop a conceptual framework that may be used to guide further research and analysis in this area. Third, we evaluate the insights offered by these theories within the applied setting of Australian farmers. Finally, we consider how these insights may be translated into preventative programs.

SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS ON SUICIDE

From our review of the literature, we have identified the work of three key researchers whose theoretical work is of relevance to this project; Durkheim (2002), Giddens (1991), and Warren (1991). We review the work of each of these theorists in turn, commencing with Durkheim. Durkheim proposed that the economic climate is central to the rate of suicide (Durkheim 2002). His work was conducted at a time when the world's leading economy (Britain) had undergone a significant economic depression following the world's first real experiment with liberal economic policies (Garraty and Gay 1972). A basic statistical analysis of the suicide data that he reported shows that there are strong ($r > .8$) and statistically significant or near significant correlations ($p < .05$; $p < .07$) between rates of suicide in trade, industry, and agriculture, providing support for his view that suicides are inherently related to the economic base. Durkheim argued that suicide is associated with increasing age and is influenced by gender. However, he noted that the influence of age and gender are nested within the broader dynamic of personal dispositions. Central to the will to suicide is the need for intense emotions that have to be associated with the experience; something that will "excite the passions" (Durkheim 2002:165). Such ignition arises from within two dynamics that may predispose individuals to suicide; these being the egoistic and the anomic tendencies, or a combination of the two.

At the heart of Durkheim's notion of egoistic suicide is the extent to which an individual is attached to things and people outside themselves. The egoistic tendency is concerned with the extent to which one is connected with and bound

to others, within the family but also within social networks and the broader community. *Collective activity*, he argued, “internalizes society within us while... as we feel detached from society we become detached from the life whose source and aim is society” (Durkheim 2002:170). Connectivity, he argued, gives people a purpose for existence, “a reason for persevering with life’s many challenges” (Durkheim 2002:169). He argued that collectivity is protective from suicide (Durkheim 2002:125). By contrast, poor connectivity makes individuals quite vulnerable to personal shocks (Durkheim 2002:173). Considered within the context of the economic situation, and as depicted in Figure 1 below, the egoistic risk to suicide emerges in the confluence of becoming, or being, socially isolated in the face of poor economic outcomes.



FIGURE 1. THE RISK OF EGOISTIC SUICIDE

The attainment of life’s goals and a sense of fairness or justice, which is experienced while pursuing such goals, are central to the risk of anomic suicide (see Figure 2). The pursuit of life’s goals is seen to give purpose and meaning to life and to underscore the construction of social identity. Durkheim argues that the significance of achieving life’s goals is especially salient in people whose passions in life have been lived beyond the ready restrictions of structured social life; who have pursued their aspirations in the way they wish. Such individuals can pursue their life goals in a manner disconnected from the regulation and constraints of

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everyday life, with which members of broader society have to contend (Durkheim 2002). The risk of anomic suicide emerges in the extent to which the pursuit of such goals is unrealistic (Durkheim 2002), as engagement with such goals inherently results in frustration and personal torment; torment generally exacerbated by the economic settings of the day. The suicidal risk is intensified where the individual feels that the failure to attain their goals arises from an unjust process, as though an unwritten social deal has been broken (Durkheim 2002), resulting in an experience of injustice with the social order; that one did not get what one deserved. Durkheim (1984) argued that such people find themselves in a state of anomie; a state characterized by an experience of normlessness, leaving people with an experience of social uncertainty, shock, role breakdown, and hypersensitivity to specific social events or interactions (Hogan 2001).



FIGURE 2. THE RISK OF ANOMIC SUICIDE

The confluence of egoistic and anomic experiences intensifies the risk of suicide. As can be seen in Figure 3, the experience of failure does not pose a risk of suicide when the outcome is seen to be fair (see also Gross 2011) and where support is present. The risk is heightened where a person's goals were unrealistic, the person is isolated, or a sense of victimization is present (Harris 2009), arising from a process that seemed unjust within the person's frame of reference. An experience of perceived injustice arises when the person believes that their aspirations have



FIGURE 3. THE COMBINED RISKS OF EGOISTIC AND ANOMIC SUICIDE

been unfairly or illegitimately thwarted or when their expectations for life are not realized. The development of a sense of injustice is likely to arise when there is a substantive shift in social values that underpin particular social roles or positions in society, leaving a person who held such a position to feel unfairly invalidated (Durkheim 2002), or when shifts in social values prevent an individual from realizing their aspirations.

For Durkheim, shame (discussed in more detail below) precipitates a crisis in personal subjectivity as the boundaries that defined a person's social world dissolve and the rules for everyday living no longer appear relevant or provide sufficient boundaries within which one can effectively function. The experience of shame arises when one is no longer able to realize one's aspirations, particularly when such aspirations are closely linked to a performative notion of identity (Giddens 1991; Moore 1994; Warren 1991) and are perceived as being known by others, and is likely to be associated with the loss of a significant and strongly-valued social position (Durkheim 2002). When a series of these kinds of events occurs in quick succession, the risk of suicide is also high. While suicide may be more common among men, Durkheim also pointed out that where women face the same kinds of risk factors, suicide is also evident. He noted, for example, that the suicide rate among widowed women who have been childless is comparatively high. Durkheim (2002) concluded that a loss of the will to live is inevitable when (i) the realities of

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everyday life make “fulfilment impossible,” (ii) no satisfaction can be found in pursuing the unobtainable, and (iii) increasing effort only results in increased loss; “how could the will to live not be weakened under such conditions?” (Durkheim 2002:214).

While Durkheim’s contribution is foundational in this field, by itself it offers an incomplete picture of the risk process and the potential for suicide prevention. Durkheim did not specifically address the issues of identity and subjectivity, and it is to these issues that we now turn. In this next section we consider the work of two key theorists, Anthony Giddens and Mark Warren, whose work focuses in different but similar ways on the important issues of the coherency and continuity of identity and the risks to subjectivity that arise when these factors are disrupted.

Giddens observed that identity “is not just something that is given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual”(1991:52). For Giddens, the coherency of identity resulted from the capacity of an individual to “keep a narrative going” (1991:54). Giddens argued that predictability is a form of trust, a psychological dynamic that “creates a sense of ontological security that *carries* (emphasis added) an individual through transitions, crises, and circumstances of high risk” (1991:38). The loss of the predictability of everyday life may also be dynamically linked to the stability of social identity and manifests itself in social competency, intimacy, pride, and a sense of personal well-being (Hogan 2001). The interaction of “identity-based dissonance” (Hogan 2001:18) and its resultant sense of anxiety cumulatively affects mental well-being as the distressed individual is subjected to more unpredictability with subsequent emotional shocks and reactions, which result in heightening sensitivity to specific triggers. In these circumstances, Giddens (1991) argued that a loss of social predictability resulting from a loss of coherency and continuity contributes to a loss of self confidence and a blurring of identity. A loss of self confidence makes it difficult for people to accurately perceive or acknowledge the difficulties they currently face, a reluctance underscored by the emergence of feelings of shame, invalidation, injustice, or anger that can be associated with the experience. These reactions and misperceptions are intensified by ongoing shocks resulting in both a hypersensitivity to dealing with the issues and an associated emotional, if not physical, disconnection from support (Hogan 2001). Giddens argued that individual control over routine activities of everyday life, such as success at work, are essential in signaling to others competency as a social actor (1991). Along with Giddens (1991), Scarr and Hogan (2011) argued that the ontologically secure subject enjoys a workable link between individual

experiences and shared interpretive frameworks. Moreover, following Bourdieu (1977), such interpretive frameworks are *doxic* or taken-for-granted by nature, being deeply inculcated in the individual as they are, through lifelong learning. Scarr and Hogan (2011) asserted that, when such an interpretive framework can adequately explain an individual's personal experience of the world, this framework operates in a way that facilitates a coherent subjectivity. When a rupture or misalignment interrupts this referential framework, an individual's personal sense of connectedness with broader meaning frameworks is jeopardized and ultimately, an individual's self-concept becomes vulnerable to collapse. Giddens (1991) called such ruptures discontinuities. Following Warren's (1991) interpretation of Nietzsche, the subjective rupture and failure of subjectivity is defined as nihilism.

Nihilism signals a breakdown in the coherency and continuity of practice. It represents a subsequent failure of interpretive schemas to account for lived experience. While nihilism signals a rupture of subjectivity, it also comes to stand for an opportunity for change and growth, a moment where interpretive frameworks and experience may change and new ways of living and acting may come about.

The ability to construct new interpretive frameworks that can account for new personal experiences is thus a key feature of adapting to change and overcoming events that might otherwise threaten our sense of self. Nietzsche called such a process the ability to create fictions when he said (1966:385):

This same species of man, grown one stage poorer, no longer possesses the strength to interpret, to create fictions, produces nihilists. A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist.

This description from the late Nietzsche is instructive in that it describes the nihilist's bind, the impossibility of maintaining a contradictory set of approaches to the world. Nietzsche further illustrated this theory: "This antagonism – not to esteem what we know, and not to be allowed any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves – results in a process of dissolution" (1966:5). Such a rupturing of interpretation and experience is an example of a process of dissolution that results in a crisis of subjectivity, and potentially, suicidal nihilism. Warren (1991) highlighted a facet of this social-political aspect of nihilism in such passages as the following:

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Nietzsche saw [nihilism] as a symptom of dissolving subjectivity, of disintegrating power, and of a failing mode of living and acting. The failure of metaphysical truth expresses this deeper problem: nihilism is a symptom of an increasingly untenable relation between basic tenets of Western culture and modern experience. (P. 14)

Here, Warren picked up on the facet of nihilism from which one can theorize subjectivity in crisis. Nihilism is what happens when subjectivity goes wrong, when, as social creatures, we are no longer able to reconcile our own subjective experience with shared interpretative frameworks. Nihilism is thus understood not as a doctrine or a philosophically worked out position, but a pathology of subjectivity. As social animals, an alignment with society is essential to an ontological sense of who we are as individuals. When this alignment occurs, our sense of self is secure, but when a rupture in the alignment occurs, for whatever reason and in whatever way, nihilism is among the possible consequences. In the nihilist state, individuals can experience (i) an enduring sense of social uncertainty and subsequent fear of social interactions, (ii) hypersensitivity to difficult situations, (iii) a tendency to socially withdraw, (iv) a loss of self confidence, and (v) a shock paralysis response that inhibits an individual from being able to tackle emerging life challenges (Hogan 2001:14). At the extreme end of the nihilism scale is a complete inability to function, a collapse of personal identity and sense of self, which may ultimately result in nihilistic suicide. Thus, this model understands subjectivity as a link between experience and coherent interpretation in a moment of relative stability. Therefore, changes to either element in this formulation have the potential to cause the kind of nihilistic rupture described above.

A CRISIS IN SUBJECTIVITY

The coherency and potential for continuity of subjective practice can be undermined or destabilized by changes in the circumstances in which a person finds themselves, as well as by shocks to the viability of this identity and practice (Giddens 1991; Warren 1991). A rupture to the coherency of identity can arise from experiencing acute shocks, sustained exposure to destabilizing factors, or a mix of both experiences. Notably, Giddens (1984) argued that these events are not necessarily easily observed by others because the events themselves are in fact packed with meaning at the level of the individual. Nonetheless, such events can result in a rupturing or misalignment between a person's referential framework and lived experience. This experience of disconnect is often associated with a sense of

shame reflecting both the value the person placed on their social identity and role in these circumstances and their perceived sense of failure within it. Central to this dynamic is the potential for shaming (Durkheim 2002). The experience of shame and identity-based dissonance (Retzinger 1996) may be associated with a breakdown of social identity (Tajfel 1972, 1981; Turner 1982, 1985; Turner et al.1994) as the factors that have underpinned the individual's sense of personal legitimacy (their sense of coherency and continuity) appear to dissolve into nothingness. Giddens argued that "(S)hame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography" (1991:65). Retzinger (1996) noted that it is the wish to hide oneself away, isolating oneself, which is particularly indicative that a critical and destabilizing shame event has occurred. Retzinger (1996) argued that shame threatens the social bond, resulting as it does in the desire to hide oneself away, to disappear from the confrontation of "embarrassment, dishonour, disgrace, humiliation, chagrin, and mortification" (Retzinger 1996:12), even if such a confrontation only occurs within one's mind. Critically, Retzinger (1996) pointed out that in the eyes of many, the shaming event may actually be quite trivial but to the individual, for whatever reason, the event is evaluated as critically important and reflective of themselves in total. The experience of feeling shamed is then about how we think "we look in the eyes of others" (Retzinger 1996:13). We argue then that it is the perceived shame event that catalyzes the individual's decision to disconnect themselves from their community and critical forms of social support. Such reactive processes sit comfortably with Durkheim's views (2002):

But society cannot disintegrate without the individual simultaneously detaching himself from social life, without his own goals becoming more preponderant over those of the community, in a word without his personality often surmounting the collective personality. The more weakened the groups to which he belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded on private interests. (P. 167)

Warren (1991) argued that, within this predicament, a crisis of subjectivity results as the individual faces limited choices; either of living in a (potentially) sustained state of ruptured subjectivity and its subsequent health and social effects, or of working toward reconciling lived experience with either dominant social norms or a new social value set from which they can find a sense of legitimacy. In

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this context a third option, that of suicide, is also evident. Lacking processes that enable individuals to reconcile their experience, and to integrate it with new ways of seeing the self and living, the person finds themselves in a potentially sustained nihilistic state, predisposing them to an increased risk of suicide. The interaction of these respective factors contributing to a suicide risk is summarized in Figure 4 below.

With these theoretical frameworks in mind, our focus now is in applying these insights to the issues of male farmer suicide in the Australian context. In so doing, we seek to resolve some inconsistencies currently present in the literature.

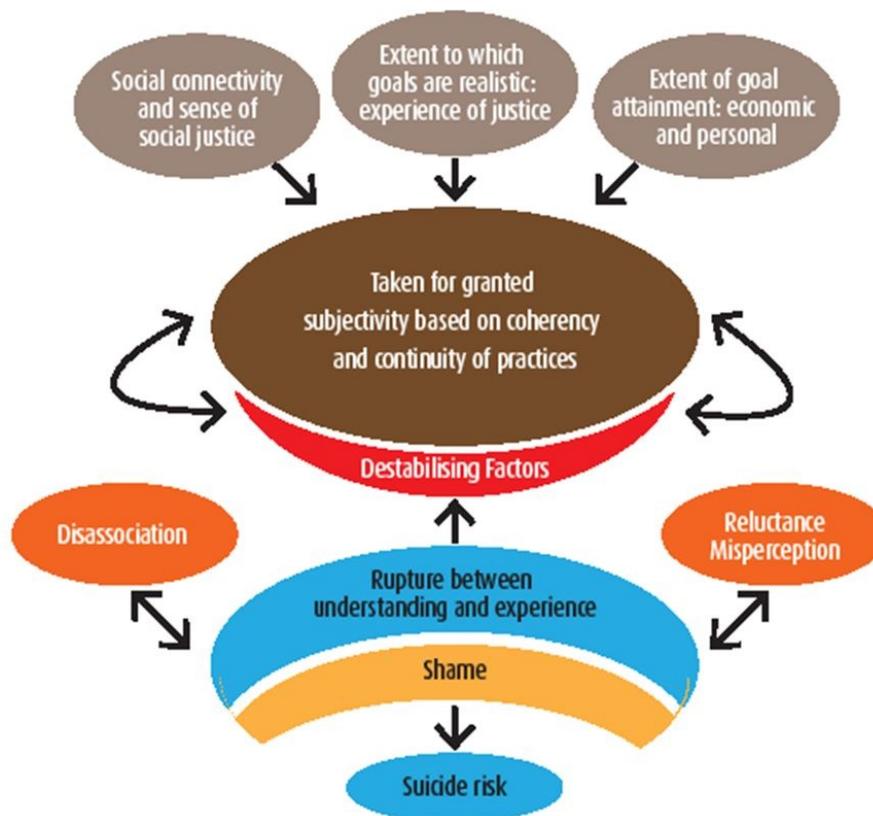


FIGURE 4. CONCEPTUALLY FRAMING THE RISK OF MALE FARMER SUICIDE

EVALUATING THE INSIGHTS OFFERED BY THESE THEORIES WITHIN AN APPLIED SETTING

We commence with the question about how realistic pursuing agriculture in Australia as a family-based livelihood is. Within the Australian context a consistent literature argues that the economic and environmental assumptions underpinning

the foundation of a great deal of agriculture, particularly irrigated agriculture in Australia, were ill-founded (Cockfield 2013; Connell and Grafton 2011). Australia is regarded as one of the driest continents on earth, with this level of dryness being exacerbated by climate change. Notably, the strongest epidemiological evidence reported to date (see above) associates farmer suicide with climatic and environmental exposures. In the financial sphere, the OECD (2006) has reported that the economic importance of farming is decreasing globally, with farms in Europe, for example, now contributing less than 2 percent of gross domestic product. Worldwide, the fundamentals of farming are changing – lower commodity prices, higher input costs, cheaper and faster transport systems, changing patterns of land use, climate change, and the corporatization of what was once an essentially family-based enterprise (Barr 2009). These are not new problems (Lockie 2000), but in recent decades these pressures have intensified such that competitive demands mean that farmers must improve their annual productivity by 3 percent just to maintain their position (Barr 2009). Financial analysis of farm turnover suggests that factors of scale are critical to farm viability and that farms which cannot achieve a comparative minimum level of financial turnover are unlikely to be viable (Hogan et al. 2008). Combining perspectives on agriculture and economics, it can be concluded that, while engaging in agriculture in Australia is not unrealistic, it can only be undertaken successfully if environmental constraints and economic pressures can be managed.

The second question we address concerns the experience of justice. Australian farmers indicate experiences of injustice on two fronts; the economic and the social licence. In the postwar period agricultural productivity was central to the Australian economy and the Australian government had in place significant economic initiatives to protect the agricultural industry from adverse climate events (Cockfield 2013; Smith and Pritchard 2012). With the decline in the economic importance of agriculture, coupled with the adoption of liberal economic policy, the availability of these supports has been significantly reduced. As a cohort, family farmers have had difficulty accepting their decline in social status and the loss of financial support – it feels unjust. In addition, many farmers feel that they have lost their “social licence to operate” (Barr 2009:98). Farmers have found themselves associated with the net effects that unsustainable forms of farming have had on the environment; effects exacerbated by climate change. In addition, animal welfare issues are becoming increasingly salient. Pictures of caged layer chickens, animal mulesing, and contentions around the export of live animals for inhumane slaughter have placed questions over the moral character of farmers.

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Moreover, the economic success of Australian farming has also been an issue. The literature reports the significant impact farm poverty has had on farmers, particularly after 10 years of extended drought (Alston 2012; Hogan, Bode, and Berry 2011; Kenny Report 2008). Alston (2012) argued that in the face of difficulties and embarrassment, individuals isolate themselves from their social networks. Critically, Alston observed that farmers “blame themselves rather than wider global and national climate events and policy responses for their circumstances . . . despair . . . renders them immobile, unable to make decisions. Rather than seeking help, their despair causes them to isolate themselves, seeing themselves as failures” (2012:519). Across rural communities out-migration is very common (OECD 2006). Much of the next generation of farmers have left rural areas to pursue careers elsewhere and the residual population is aging. Barr observed that as rural decline increases, the capacity for local communities to provide social connectivity and mutual support declines (2009). Environmental crises, such as drought and climate change, further reduce social connectivity as producers have to spend more time on the farm and consequently have less time to spend on community activities: “Dryness negatively impacts on the ability of members of a rural community to work together for the benefit of the whole community, eroding the capacity of people to engage in community projects or do the voluntary work that keeps rural communities alive” (Kenny Report 2008:3).

We have already outlined above the nature of taken-for-granted subjectivity and described the process of ruptured identity. We note here that the precipitating factors that set up the risk of ruptured identity are evident in farmers’ lives. The rupturing of subjectivity, resulting as it may from a destabilization of the coherent, continuing personal narrative, is often associated with a sense of shame and subsequent social withdrawal, reflecting the value the person placed on their social identity and role in these circumstances and embarrassment about their perceived sense of failure. An additional sense of failure and shame may be associated with being the one who failed to pass on the family farm. While a sense of shame may be associated with a perceived sense of failure, the perceived demand of needing to do more work on the farm provides a coherent self-justification for staying on the farm and working harder and longer while enabling one to avoid embarrassing social interactions. As such, the demands of the farm can enable one to detach oneself from social supports at a time when they are most needed. Within the literature these dynamics have been called reluctance and misperception (Hetu and Getty 1991). On the one hand, given the potential awkwardness of social encounters, farmers may be reluctant to acknowledge the difficulties that they face and so avoid seeing

others. Avoidance of social interactions can readily be justified on the basis that more farm work is required during hard times. On the other hand, farmers misperceive themselves as the cause of the problem and try harder to solve such problems (Patel 2007). However, misperception contributes to defeat when the causes of the problems are outside one's control. Nonetheless, the case study material cited here supports the theoretical view that a sense of shame and subsequent social withdrawal are associated with the rupturing of subjectivity.

Before progressing to address the issue of prevention, the question of the role of gendered identity remains unresolved. We do not contest the fact that many Australian farmers have an identity steeped in hegemonic masculine identity (Alston 2012; Connell 1987; Lawrence and Gray 2000; Lockie 2000). We argue that attempts to situate masculinity as the central factor underpinning male farmer suicide simply overextends the likely contribution that gender makes within a material context. Alston (2012) was correct to argue that persistent physical and psychological shocks do contribute to the rupturing of identity; however, the nature of these shocks is not gendered specifically. Contrary to Carrington and Scott (2008), we argue that the place of gender is over-argued and not theoretically considered within the broader literature and evidence available on this issue.

GIVING FARMERS A NEW PERSPECTIVE

This paper proposes that in preventing farmer suicide, farmers need to be able to develop a perspective as to the extent to which they may have been affected by an array of influences that in turn, cumulatively, place them at risk. Moreover, it asserts that enabling farmers to develop a coherent and continuing valued sense of self, in the face of such stressors, will better enable them to manage the mental pressures such influences place upon them. In this last part of the paper, we consider how these insights can be integrated within existing approaches to farmer suicide prevention.

In Australia, several health services seek to engage farmers in health promotion programs, including suicide prevention. These services include The National Centre for Farmer Health (Victoria), the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (particularly Queensland), and the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (University of Newcastle based in Orange, New South Wales). Providers within these services readily acknowledge that a critical issue for reducing the risk of farmer suicide is the development of early identification and effective engagement strategies. The National Centre for Farmer Health in particular has been developing a trusted person's model of farmer engagement. A trusted person's

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model seeks to develop a farmer's readiness to utilize preventive health services incrementally, working over time to engage the farmer in addressing health issues that may be particularly stigmatizing or threatening to identity. Such projects commence with engaging farmers in safer and more expectable health care activities, such as monitoring and managing sun or chemical exposures, cholesterol, body mass, and blood pressure before seeking to engage farmers in managing more stigmatized areas of health, such as alcohol consumption, hearing loss, and mental health needs. The model proposes that as trust and rapport are developed over time, the health profession comes to be trusted ever more by the farmer such that in time they can invite them to engage in learning more about risky behaviors that may be slow in onset, linked to social identity, and potentially stigmatizing in their nature (Hogan, Reynolds, and O'Brien 2011). Slow onset, behaviorally-related conditions often have two key attributes that serve as barriers to effective engagement processes; the affected person misperceives the effects of the condition and/or they are reluctant to acknowledge that their health status or behaviors have changed (Hetu and Getty 1991; Hogan 2001). Using an engagement strategy that seeks to open the person to the possibility that they have been affected (Latour 2004) by the risk of interest, the trusted person invites the at-risk person and their partner (or good friend) to engage in facilitated self-help. This is an indirect, sensitizing approach that seeks to avoid confrontation and enables people to gradually and safely let down their defenses. Readiness for change emerges out of a maieutic (birthing) process where individuals may move from a cognitive perception of the issues that confront them to engagement in a process that enables people to address what being affected means for them, as farmers, working in structurally difficult circumstances (Evans 2009).

The National Centre for Farmer Health is already using this process successfully with stigmatized conditions such as hearing loss (where the dynamics of misperception and reluctance are well recognized) (Hetu and Getty 1991) and is now considering how this process may be extended to suicide prevention programs. The existing intervention utilizes a three-phase program of sensitization that creates a structure or process through which individuals begin to work through the issues confronting them (Hogan 2001). The first phase simply focuses on recognizing that *I am affected* and provides a supported time for the individual to experience the emotion associated with this affectation without simultaneously being pushed to resolve the issues underpinning being affected. It is a time of defusing and desensitization. The second phase continues a focus on *how I am affected* while beginning to introduce material that enables individuals to recognize

what has led to them being affected in this way. Again, no attempt is made to move toward solving problems. The second phase is centered on learning to accept, as Durkheim noted, the limitations of life and its constraints on aspirations. The third phase centers on learning to live within the limits of structured social life versus doing one's own thing. It works to enable the person to find a sense of justice in life's experiences and on finding meaning in a broader range of ways of living.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has presented a theoretical framework that we hope will assist in developing an understanding of the phenomenon of male farmer suicide. The framework recognizes Durkheim's (2002) foundational theoretical work in this space, and the consistency of lived experience with his early work. The notable differences that have occurred since Durkheim's time are the destabilization of the economic base that once underpinned farming as a family business, intensified globalization, and climate change. The paper extends Durkheim's work by theoretically integrating it within key sociological insights concerned with identity and risks to subjectivity. We have argued that it is the loss of social predictability, predicated by a variety of physical, economic, and psychosocial shocks, which undermines ontological security. In such contexts, one's sense of competency as a social actor begins to break down. The loss of the coherency of identity and the potential loss of a continuity of social practice results in a ruptured identity—what Nietzsche called nihilism. The combined effects of reluctance to acknowledge difficulties, the misperception of one's problems, and experiences of shame contribute strongly to nihilism and the will to suicide. The model moves beyond circumstantial observations and provides a coherent framework for addressing this phenomenon.

The insights arising from the framework can similarly be used to inform approaches to suicide prevention. Learning that one is affected in a systemic way addresses the psychological issues of legitimacy that result from experiences of shame, reluctance, misperception, and unrealistic goals, while giving one 'permission' to become open to the possibilities of alternate ways of constructing a positive and valued self.

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