

The Big Dry



The link between rural masculinities and poor health outcomes for farming men

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Abstract

The long-running Australian drought has had significant economic and environmental consequences, not least its impact on water supplies for major cities. What is less well understood are the social consequences affecting the farm families and communities reliant on agricultural production. In this article we focus on the mental health outcomes for farm men, noting that they are more vulnerable to extreme measures such as suicide. We argue that a dominant form of hegemonic masculinity in rural areas, which has served men well in good times, allowing them power and privilege, is inherently unhealthy in times of significant stress such as the current drought. The stoicism so typical of normative rural masculinity prevents men from seeking help when their health is severely compromised. We argue that attending to the health of rural men during drought requires attention not just to health outcomes but also to hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: drought, masculinities, mental health, resilience, rural

Australia is in the grip of an intense drought – one that has impacted across the continent for much of the new century with devastating consequences. While the drought has had a major impact on agricultural productivity (Drought Review Panel, 2004), significant social issues are also evident and these include serious health and welfare implications (Alston and Kent, 2004, 2006; Drought Review Panel, 2004). Of concern are the increasing mental health impacts on farm family members, and one of the more evident and disturbing manifestations of this is anecdotal evidence of a rise in the number of male farmers taking their own life. This has been described by Jeff Kennett, the chairman of the national depression initiative, *Beyond Blue*, as ‘a rate of one every four days’ (AAP, 2006), a statistic nonetheless suggested by the Australian Division of General Practitioners as being too conservative (ABC, 2006a).

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There is no doubt that the drought has affected the health and mental health of women and children in farming families as well (Alston and Kent, 2004). What is particularly disturbing about male farmers' responses, however, is that even in times unaffected by drought they have generally poorer health and take part in more risky behaviours (Courtenay, 2006) and yet are loath to seek help for their health problems, preferring to remain stoic in the face of extraordinary circumstances. It is this very stoicism, a recognized characteristic of normative rural masculinity (Courtenay, 2006), that appears to lead to their failure to address their own health needs during times of heightened stress. In this article we explore the links between hegemonic rural masculinity and men's mental health, noting that the drought appears to have exacerbated men's poor health outcomes (Alston and Kent, 2004). We argue that while a dominant masculine hegemony has benefited rural men in good times, the drought exposes how inherently unhealthy this position can be. First we examine the drought and its economic and environmental consequences before turning to an examination of rural masculinities and men's health. We then present preliminary findings from our drought study, drawing on interviews conducted with farm men, their partners and community key informants to draw out the links between rural masculinity and poor health outcomes in times of extreme stress. Our findings suggest that the 'hypermasculine swagger of rural masculinity' (Campbell et al., 2006: 9) has significant health consequences for men and restricts their ability or motivation to seek help. We argue that attention to mental health issues among farmers must not only focus on health impacts but also address normative rural masculinity if we are to achieve healthier outcomes for rural men.

Australia's Big Dry

The drought which has been a feature of Australia's climatic conditions during the 2000s has had significant economic and environmental consequences. By 2003 Botterill and Fisher (2003) were reporting a \$7 billion cost to the economy. More recent evidence suggests that the cost has escalated and further significant impacts on the national economy are predicted. For example, a 30 percent reduction in farm GDP is forecast for 2006–7 and a national GDP drop of 0.8 percent (ANZ, 2006), leading the (then) Australian Treasurer, Peter Costello, to predict a rural depression in 2007 (ABC, 2006b). The loss of farm income, together with rising costs of inputs such as fuel and fertilizer, suggests that the future productivity of the agricultural sector will be severely constrained and the ability of individual farming families to recover quickly is under threat.

Meanwhile, the cost to the environment became the subject of almost daily commentary in the media during the latter half of 2006 and into 2007, the interest of urban populations sparked by fears for urban water supplies.

Drought, climate change, water usage, irrigation, the health of the nation's rivers and the right to farm have all come under the microscope as major cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane face restrictions on water usage and a crisis looms if significant rains in the metropolitan catchment areas are delayed. Several reports from the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) attest to the significance of water shortages for cities as well as inland agricultural usage (CSIRO, 2006), and these implications have meant that the drought has become much bigger in the public imagination than a vexatious event limited in its impact to rural production and landscapes. The increasing portrayal of the drought/climate change discourse as an urban as well as rural concern has alarmed rural representative bodies, who see a more punitive approach to farming being enacted and a challenge looming to the right to farm (see for example ABC, 2003, 2006c). While the financial circumstances of farm families may be dire, their issues and voice are being lost in a much broader community debate, leading to fear that their futures are further under threat from increasing scrutiny of their farming practices. The pressures these factors add to the already difficult circumstances being experienced by farmers are of relevance when we examine the health impacts for farm men.

Rural men's health

There is no doubt that rural men have poorer health outcomes than urban-based men and are less healthy on a number of indicators than rural women. They are more likely to die younger than women (Malcher, 2006) and have higher rates of cardio-vascular disease and other preventable diseases. Courtenay (2006) notes that men are more likely to die from the ten leading causes of death, are twice as likely to die from heart disease, and one and a half times more likely to die of cancer. Rural men adopt more risky health behaviour than women in relation to tobacco use, physical activity, unintentional injuries, occupational injuries, motor vehicle accidents and alcohol use (Courtenay, 2006). Of particular concern for this article is that the rate of suicide and self-harm among rural men is almost twice that of their urban counterparts (Bourke, 2001). It is the rise in mental health issues and, in particular, the suicide rate, as a result of the Big Dry that has alarmed commentators such as Jeff Kennett (AAP, 2006). That farmer bodies themselves are aware of the crisis is demonstrated by the establishment of mental health working groups by both the NSW Farmers' Association and the South Australian Farmers' Federation.¹

Yet while the link to drought is evident, Australia is not the only country with a high suicide rate among farmers, suggesting that there are factors other than the immediate drought crisis at work. Ni Laoire (2001) notes that the suicide rate is high among rural men in Ireland and Britain, with

farmers over-represented in the high-risk categories. In an excellent analysis of the causes of rural male suicide rates, Ni Laoire notes that suicide is linked to hopelessness, entrapment and despair, a lack of a positive view of the future and a lack of control over internal and external events – including government policy, weather and restructuring – suggesting that it is a socio-political as well as a medical problem. She also notes the lack of social support as a major issue for farmers, and cites the out-migration of women and the lack of services as significant factors in this loss of support. Critical to her analysis is the challenge that all of these changes pose to hegemonic masculinity. Economic uncertainty and a threat to their ability to pass on the family farm destabilize notions of masculine identity and responsibility. What is clear is that changing circumstances have impacted on men's sense of their hegemonic position and have had serious impacts on their mental health. In Australia the drought has exacerbated men's mental health problems and the way men respond is complicated by the dominance of a particular hegemonic form of rural masculinity that leads them to stoicism and a lack of help-seeking behaviour when their health is compromised. Before presenting the results of our own research, we examine the concept of masculine hegemony and its particular rural manifestations.

Rural masculinities

Hegemonic masculinity is defined by Connell as 'the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations' (1995: 74) or, more recently, as 'the pattern of practice that allowed men's dominance over women to continue' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2006: 832). Connell (1995) describes both a society-wide gender order, where men's concerns are prioritized and women are subordinated, and a gender regime at the more intimate level of the family, where gender relations are constantly negotiated and reshaped. In rural areas, and against a backdrop of men's greater access to resources and power, men are portrayed as strong and tough (Leipins, 2000), rugged individuals who are stoical in the face of adversity. This image is constructed around male dominance over women but also over land, and involves their pre-eminence in public life and ownership and control of most of the resources of agriculture, providing a significant source of power in rural communities and politics (Alston, 2000; Campbell et al., 2006; Dempsey, 1992). The dominant masculinity in rural areas is so normalized it is usually invisible, and all other positions relate to this norm (Campbell et al., 2006). This position has given many rural men influence in rural communities and agriculture, allowing them to receive benefits in terms of status, wealth and political power. While this hegemonic position has benefited men in good times, it also locks them into fairly rigid subject positions, typified by a stoic resistance to adversity and a rugged individualism that prevents help-seeking behaviour. The very

stoicism that is its hallmark tends to prevent men addressing their health needs.

Yet, as Leipins (2000: 605) notes, men are 'made' in Australian agriculture – a socio-cultural field where gender positions are socially constructed in hierarchical ways. While men are constructed as strong and tough, women are viewed as subordinate and peripheral, positions that render both men and women disadvantaged. For women, this results in their near invisibility in the agricultural discourse, despite their significant economic contributions to the family unit (Alston, 2006). For men, the dominant masculine hegemony creates the perception that they will overcome adversity, and this is problematic when times are tough. Little (2006) notes the need to civilize and domesticate men to achieve stable gender relations. As the drought bites, it has necessarily changed the gender regime level negotiations around these relations, but not necessarily in ways that achieve the aims espoused by Little. Power relations are affected by women's off-farm income-generating activity, which has become essential to farm family survival. Despite this work being subsumed into the 'farm wife' role (Alston, 2006), thereby reducing challenges to power relations within the farm unit, it nevertheless provides a significant threat to men's superordinate position. This destabilization of traditional, hierarchical, gender roles challenges traditional normative rural masculinity and is resisted in various ways by men (Campbell, 2006).

In rural areas, because of their pre-eminence in agriculture, men have a significant investment in maintaining the dominant hegemonic position and any challenge is intensely threatening to men's sense of themselves (Campbell, 2006). Power is central to any study of rural masculinities and cannot be divorced from its context in inherently inequitable rural gender relations: where patriarchy dominates, men hold most of the public positions of power in agriculture and traditional household divisions prevail (Shortall, 2006). Yet there is little doubt that the current drought and ongoing rural restructuring in agriculture, together with women's changing roles, threaten hierarchical gender relations and hence threaten the long-established patriarchal dominance in rural society. Thus the stresses inherent in the drought, low commodity prices, work pressures and financial stress have impacted on men's sense of their identity and have therefore created health stresses in general and mental health issues in particular. Gender relations are continually reshaped by ongoing negotiations between men and women as both face inherent tensions in these contested roles. In this article we focus on men, arguing that their adherence to certain subject positions leads them to resist seeking help (Courtenay, 2006) and that this resistance can further exacerbate their health crises.

The rapid and ongoing structural and climatic changes are something over which men have no control; in this context, their lack of help-seeking behaviour could be viewed as both a signifier of hegemonic masculinity and

a resistance by men to the challenges to this position. Ni Laoire (2001) argues that the rural crisis is in fact a crisis of rural masculinities and, if we are to address men's health, then there is a need to expose hegemonic masculinity as inherently unhealthy for men. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2006) note, masculine domination is open to challenge, particularly when it no longer provides inherent privilege, as it requires significant effort to maintain. Bock and Shortall (2006) note that changing gender relations are themselves drivers for change, and therefore reshaping rural masculinities in the context of more equitable gender relations may lead to better health outcomes for men. As Ni Laoire (2001: 232) notes 'masculinities research can shed light on socio-political processes occurring in rural areas, in particular processes involving the well being of rural men'. To explore the links between masculine hegemony and men's health further, we turn to our own research on the social impacts of drought.

The study

In 2003, with the Australian drought showing little sign of abating, we undertook qualitative research into the social impacts of this catastrophic event. Our research was funded by the New South Wales state government and took us to three small inland communities, one in a remote area, one in the central west wheat belt and one in a southern irrigation area. These communities were chosen because of their reliance on agricultural production, because smaller communities are more likely to have declining or stagnant populations and to have experienced withdrawal of service infrastructure, and because towns with a population of 5000 or less are more likely to be eroding (Tonts, 2000). We therefore felt that the people in these areas would have fewer supports and be most exposed to the drought; and that the social impacts would therefore be more readily observable. In each of the communities we interviewed farm family members and key community informants about the drought and its social impacts. In all, over 120 semi-structured interviews were completed, 62 of these with farm family members and 25 of these with farm men. It is these interviews that we are drawing on for this article. While the research focus was much broader than an analysis of men's mental health, we have extracted information from our interview data about the way men perceive the drought, its association with their health and how this impacts on their sense of identity.

Findings

The drought – rising sense of uncertainty

The drought has been a feature of the areas studied since at least the early 2000s and has continued largely unabated since then. When this research

was conducted the areas in question were suffering significant drought conditions and major economic consequences. The reliance of the communities on agriculture meant that it is not only farming families being affected. Small businesses are under significant financial pressure, schools have lost student numbers because of the out-migration of workers and their families, service infrastructure is being, or had been, withdrawn and the mood of the communities is generally sombre. At the time of the interviews, farming families had been experiencing a prolonged period with little or no income from the farm, resulting in over 50 percent of families represented relying on off-farm income, much of which was being earned by women. Workloads had increased as a result of the need for livestock to be hand-fed and for water to be carted, and these same factors had led to escalating debt.

Nonetheless, as Stehlik and colleagues (1999) note, drought is a gendered experience, and the way men and women had responded reflected the highly structured, hierarchical, patriarchal industry that is agriculture. Men were more likely to have increased their workloads on the farm – feeding livestock and carting water – in the process reducing their time away from the farm and becoming more socially isolated.

A typical day is you get up. It's filled with a lot more worry. Normal times if you're on the land you get up and your whole day's thinking about how you can improve your property, improve your sheep. That's changed. It's become more of a drudge. You get up. There's always animals to feed. You'll be cutting a bit of mulga or feeding stock. It's much more regimented.... I don't think I'm as happy a person as I used to be. You tend to be less tolerant, get crankier easier. (Man, central west farm)

The increased workload often meant that all members of the family were being drawn into on-farm work tasks, with men working significantly increased hours and women more likely to have increased their on-farm work, assisting with livestock feeding and checking water, while at the same time working off the farm sourcing income. Women were also more likely to be the farm financial managers and to have retained the major responsibility for household and care work. Nonetheless, changes in work roles during the drought indicate challenges to the hegemonic ideal of male breadwinner and add to the uncertainty about gender roles and relationships of power. Women are working for essential income and men are working but watching their dreams and productivity slip away. For example, one man describes how his wife's role has moved beyond 'help' to encompass something much more significant – a work role that is fundamentally necessary to the family's survival in farming.

[The drought's] changed the work on the farm in a huge way. My wife's had to come into play in a big way. She's always been a lot of help, don't get me wrong. (Man on irrigation farm discussing the on-farm work of his wife)

Social isolation

While workloads had increased significantly, the stoicism of farm men in the face of adversity is evident in our interviews. One obvious area was their acceptance of increasing social isolation as a result of their heavier workloads.

You cut down on stuff like that [leaving the farm for social activities]. It's the easiest thing to cut down. It's the first thing to go. (Man on remote farm)

You can't go anywhere because they've [livestock] got to be fed. (Man on central west farm)

I haven't had the time to get in [for football training] I'm so tired during the day.... Like it's 110 km to come in from home and it's finding the time.... I don't come to town a terrible lot anyway.... I don't come to town quite as much. (Young man on remote farm)

Men spoke of the way this isolation had affected their social skills.

After a while you lose conversation. (Man on central west farm)

A lot of people probably quieten down because they haven't got the energy. They've got these big things that they're worrying about.... the future just can't go on like this. (Man on remote farm)

Compromised health

While many men referred to the impacts of this social isolation and the stress of the drought on their health, it was more often women who spoke at length of the impacts on their men's health as a result of workload pressures and financial stress. Men were more circumspect or dismissive of health implications.

My husband's just had [a heart operation]. He has been out there on his own [while I work in town]. He has had a bit of a wake-up call. (Woman on remote farm)

[Husband] is terribly tired and he is terribly, terribly sick of going out and doing the same thing every day. He is really sick of the mundane, constant thing. (Woman on central west farm)

Oh he's tired and we've got two children under five and he feels quite guilty about not having any time with them. (Woman on central west farm)

While the subject of mental health issues is a delicate one, men were prepared to discuss them. However, they tended to refer to their mental health problems as 'stress', and very occasionally as depression, rather than anything more sinister.

Stress is a hard thing to accept. And you've got to get used to it. If you can't handle it, it'll get you down. You've got to switch off. But it's hard to handle. (Man on remote farm)

I'm taking about seven [tablets] – and that is a stress ... to help us sleep and keep us thinking properly. (Man on irrigation farm)

I didn't think I was stressed. But I always had this sick feeling, for 12 months now. I was worried about the stresses of the drought but I didn't think it was visible and people noticed. Mum could tell and [wife] could tell. 'You look drawn and stressed.' But I didn't think I was showing it. (Man on central west farm)

It's pretty hard at the moment when you walk around to be optimistic, but occasionally you get a couple of hours in bursts when you can be optimistic. Then you go back to depression for the rest of the day. (Man on central west farm)

Men often referred to their social isolation and resulting lack of motivation as one symptom of the malaise they found themselves enduring, but tended not to see this as a mental health problem.

You're never away from work on the farm. You are living on the thing so all your time is spent here.... You get very down and tend to sit and look at things. (Man on central west farm)

It has a dampening effect on spirits and attitude ... you feel less motivated. (Man on remote farm)

However, there were some men who were prepared to note the extent of their mental anguish.

I'm desperate and hanging on by the skin of my teeth. (Man on central west farm)

It's knocked the wind out of my sails. (Man on central west farm)

Some mornings when I get up and find I can hardly walk outside for arthritis.... I suffer from a lot of problems with my bones, my back, osteoporosis, arthritis, and a few other problems. It takes me a long time to get up and a long time to get down and I'm in pain all day long.... We have just grown old while this drought has been on. (Man on central west farm)

It does get to me. I get quite depressed and down about it sometimes.... You have one of those days like you'll have a heap of things go wrong. Everything you touch breaks ... and you start to wonder 'Well, is it really worth it?' (Young man on remote farm)

Only a couple of men were prepared to be entirely transparent about their mental health.

I was suicidal in January and February. Emotionally the worst period of my life.... I feel very isolated.... I'm running out of resilience to keep taking the blows and keep moving on.... I carry the hurt inside. (Man on irrigation farm)

Women were more likely to identify their husband's state of mind as depression and often expressed extreme concern for their mental health.

He's aged dramatically in the last 12 months. He's drinking more. He's quite depressed at times. I tend to find that I have to arrive home and see what sort of day he's had or how things are going before I react. (Woman on central west farm)

My husband has gone on to blood pressure tablets because of the strain and very depressed. I'll see him standing there looking out. (Woman on central west farm)

He's depressed, he's cranky with the kids all the time. He's cranky with me all the time. He drinks more. He smokes more.... He feels that if he doesn't get out he'll go mad. (Woman on remote farm)

Stoicism

Nonetheless, it was clear from our interviews that men resisted help-seeking behaviour, preferring to retain their stoicism in the face of extraordinary adversity.

I'm starting to think I need to go to someone. I really am. But I wouldn't know where to look. (Man on irrigation farm)

It's more stressful ... a great bloody scenario of this depression.... I get down in the dumps.... It's not hard to get a little bit cranky.... I get headaches and stuff and Dad gets shocking cramps.... It's not really discussed.... It's sorry, keep going ... all brushed under the carpet.... It's not handled the way it should be handled ... (Young man on central west farm)

Women also indicated their frustration and worry about their partner's resistance to seeking help.

He won't go [to health services]. (Woman on central west farm)

My husband doesn't come to town very often because you can't afford the petrol to come to town. He won't go and see a doctor. He does need health services. He has a complaint but he won't go and have it fixed because he says 'No, who can run the farm? I mean I can't afford to pay anybody to run this farm so I have to stay and do it and put up with this.' (Woman on remote farm)

I think he keeps things to himself more when he's worried about things. But you can see the stress, you can see that he's worried. But I think that he prefers not to talk about it. (Woman on central west farm)

He's busier, there's more to do and ... sleep is a bit of an issue.... He tends to keep things to himself so I've got to do a bit more digging to actually get him to talk about it. (Woman on central west farm)

Threat to hegemonic masculinity

In communicating their understanding of the impacts of the drought, men often obliquely referred to the challenge posed to their position as 'farmer', with all its hegemonic connotations. Nonetheless, it is clear that their identity is innately shaped by their farming role and that the current threats to farming were threats to their sense of self. Many verbalized this as a threat to their spiritual connection to the land.

I'm more connected to the land.... It's not just the land, it's the stock, it's all in there. I think [wife] sees it slightly differently. She looks more to the financial side of it and it hurts her badly. Like how are we going to educate them [their children], what are we going to do ...? (Man on remote farm)

You've lost a bit of your heart ... you've lost a bit of yourself.... It will never be quite the same. It will never be quite as good again.... There won't be as much drive there. (Man on remote farm)

The challenge to retain their identity as ‘farmer’ was nonetheless evident in the interviews and this is often manifested as a growing sense of powerlessness over external events.

It certainly makes you more cynical. It’s harder to get up in the morning. And it’s a long way back.... It’s so far back. (Man on central west farm)

It’s like a person on a wage and the car breaks down today and the debt collectors take the furniture tomorrow and the kids all get the flu the next day and you’ve still got to turn up to work each day and then the boss tells you that he’s not going to pay you for 12 months but you’ve got to keep working anyway. It’s sort of a bit like that scenario. It’s just chaotic out-of-control stuff going on all the time. (Man on irrigation farm)

Men spoke despairingly of their declining financial security and the loss of belief in the future. This represents a threat to their identity as the chief family provider and undermines their plans for their future.

Last May I said to my wife we’ll be debt-free in three years. We can work another two years and then put money away and in two years retire to either a bed and breakfast or a motel or something, and we’re not going to be tied down like milking cows seven days a week.... We were doing well.... Like one minute you’re in front and the next minute you’re gone. (Man on central west farm)

Bash your head against a brick wall and lose money and see all my superannuation go dry – my superannuation is my farm. We did hope we could retire ... but it’s looking less and less likely. (Man on irrigation farm)

The link between men and their land is recognized by one service provider as an overriding feature of their identity.

Their block [of land] is their security. Their block is everything to them and that’s what they live for. They don’t live for their family or their wife. They live for the block and when something’s wrong with the block it’s the end, it’s the living end. (Service provider in irrigation area)

Several women also linked the erosion of farming to the erosion of men’s identity as farmers.

He’s in denial. What he wants out of life comes from a pride that he was going to achieve something in life and on the farm and it’s slipping away ... (Woman on central west farm)

Discussion

While the link between men’s health outcomes and rural masculinities has been discussed in previous research (Courtenay, 2006), we have drawn attention to the escalation of mental health issues among male farmers as a result of the crisis in Australian agriculture brought on by ongoing rural restructuring and the long-running drought. This research extends our understanding of the impact of a dominant hegemonic masculinity on

men's health outcomes. Our research was not primarily focused on this aspect of men's identity, but we have been able to draw on it to indicate the health implications of this long-running crisis. Community organizations such as Beyond Blue and the Black Dog Institute are focusing attention and resources on men as a result of evidence that mental health problems are increasingly prevalent among male farmers, most obviously in the rising suicide rate. It is therefore of critical importance that we do not simply attend to health outcomes, but that we also expose dominant rural masculinities as a construct to be exposed as inherently unhealthy if we are to improve rural men's health.

Understanding why men's mental health in particular has been adversely affected requires a detailed understanding of hierarchical gender relations and hegemonic masculinity in rural areas, and the way farming men construct their identities. The hegemonic position posits men as strong and stoic individuals, who work long hours in a harsh environment taming the land. In good times this normative masculinity has served men well, allowing them to accumulate resources, power and influence. In the current drought this position has been exposed as intrinsically unhealthy for men, because the very stoicism so indicative of rural masculinity limits men's ability to seek help during times of extreme stress. We note that masculinity is not fixed, but constantly practised, re-negotiated and shaped by context. It is, therefore, changeable. We argue that exposing the essentially unhealthy nature of the dominant practised form of masculinity in the Australian rural context will allow changes that result in more favourable health outcomes. Understanding the way we do gender will also assist women in achieving more equitable gender relations as an additional benefit of this exposure.

We have drawn on our research into the social impacts of drought undertaken in 2003 to show that men continue to work hard, often becoming more socially isolated and more prone to mental health problems as the drought continues. Men speak of their 'stress' and the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness they feel in the face of the unrelenting conditions. Their female partners recognize their mental distress as more significant than stress and agonize over their health outcomes. Nonetheless, they and their partners acknowledge that men are reluctant to seek help, preferring to maintain their stoic attitude.

It is also clear from our research that men's identity is intrinsically linked to their role as farmers. They tend to view this as their primary role, a role that they see as linking them more fundamentally to the land than others around them and hence establishing their sense of identity as linked to the fortunes of the land. Any challenge to the farmer role – and the drought is one such threat – is viewed as intensely threatening to their sense of self. Yet their identification with normative masculinity leads to a resistance to help-seeking behaviour that threatens their health and well-being. Courtenay

(2006) describes the gendered practices that signify masculinity as inherently unhealthy and those men who endorse these practices as the unhealthiest. We support O'Hara's contention that men's health outcomes will be improved by paying greater attention to rural masculinities, to the creation of more equitable gender relations and to exposure of the unhealthy results of normative rural masculinity. Creating a discourse where men can understand and address their resistant behaviour is a small step that may create improved health outcomes.

Our research focused on the social impacts of the drought and hence covered health as one of a number of other aspects. However, we note that further research on the factors that make individual men more vulnerable, and on support services that might be shaped to enable their greater access to services, is required. We also note that, without further attention to rural men's health and the factors that make them particularly vulnerable, they will be left isolated and unsupported, in danger of adding to the suicide statistics – statistics that represent rural men's significant 'cry for help' (Ni Laoire, 2001). Attending to this cry for help remains a national priority.

Note

- 1 One of the writers, Margaret Alston, has been appointed a member of both these groups. The NSW Farmers' body was established in 2005 specifically to address mental health issues among farmers. The South Australian Rural Sustainability Taskforce was set up in 2005 and prioritized addressing the mental health of farmers as one of its three key objectives.

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