



## 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.

## 1.2. Neoliberal political economy

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault analyzes the emergence of political economy in conjunction with liberalism at the end of the 18th century. Political economy can be broadly understood as “any method of government that can procure the nation’s prosperity” (Foucault, 2008: 13). The concept of political economy therefore enables examination of the ways in which governmentality – or mentalities of government – are interwoven with the economy (Foucault, 2008). Governmentality refers to the rationalities or rational principles that shape the manner in which government is conducted. As Barry et al. (1996: 7) explain, this means that “political rationalities are more than just ideologies; they constitute a part of the fabric of our ways of thinking about and acting upon one another and ourselves”. Political economy can therefore be understood as a political way of thinking and acting that constitutes a framework for economic activity. Foucault (2008: 286) clarifies that, “Economics is a science lateral to the art of government” but takes place within a political and legal framework. This leads Foucault (2008: 173) to suggest that for the state and individuals, “The economy is a game and the legal institution which frames the economy should be thought of as the rules of the game”.

In terms of the historical emergence of political economy, Foucault’s (2008: 322) concern was with the way in which liberalism (as the forerunner to neoliberalism) constituted a “critique of the irrationality peculiar to excessive government”. He suggests that, “The possibility of limitation [governmental action limiting itself] and the question of truth are both introduced into governmental reason through political economy” (Foucault, 2008: 17). The nature and ‘natural’ laws of economics, which constitute a system without sovereignty, raises problems for government in terms of how to govern such a system in a way that ensures national prosperity. Foucault (2008: 17) proposes that “with political economy we enter an age whose principle could be this: A government is never sufficiently aware that it always risks governing too much, or, a government never knows too well how to govern just enough”. It is as a solution to this problem of government that liberalism and later neoliberalism emerge.

Neoliberalism as “a way of doing things” (Foucault, 2008: 318) is a governmental strategy for the management of freedom. Rather than a retreat from a state controlled economy, neoliberalism entailed a transformation in the way in which the state regulates economic activity (Barry et al., 1996). According to neoliberal political reason, it is “the responsibility of political government to actively create the conditions within which entrepreneurial and competitive conduct is possible” (Barry et al., 1996: 10). It was thought that through freedom of choice and a foregrounding of competition, market mechanisms would “ensure regulation of the formation of prices” and avoid economic distortions (Foucault, 2008: 322). As a strategy for regulating freedom, neoliberal governmentality “operates on interests, desires, and aspirations rather than through rights and obligations; it does not directly mark the body, as sovereign power, or even curtail actions, as disciplinary power; rather, it acts on the conditions of action” (Read, 2009: 29). This mentality of government was accompanied by an apparatus of knowledge and practices to shape individual conduct through actions calculated according to economic principles of efficiency and cost/benefit ratios.

Through practices that shape individual conduct, neoliberal governmentality is linked to a particular mode of subjectivation constitutive of a certain type of subject – the neoliberal subject or ‘*homo aeconomicus*’ (Foucault, 2008). As Foucault (2008: 272) explains, this is “a form of a subject of individual choices” whose freedom to pursue individual interests through investment (that will garner the greatest possible profit for the least possible cost) is

compatible with the interests of all (economic growth). In neoliberal political economy, *Homo aeconomicus* is free to act in accordance with his<sup>1</sup> own interests in relation to external elements over which the subject has no control (Foucault, 2008: 272). As such, the freedom of the subject is a delimited freedom since possibilities for action are shaped in advance through broader social and political structures and processes. Within a neoliberal political economy, the subject is therefore compelled to form as an ‘entrepreneur’ in seeking out opportunities for strategic investment and managing actuarial risk.

## 1.3. Neoliberalized agri-business

Australian agriculture, including viticulture, is predominantly family structured and regulated according to neo-liberal rationalities. Complex intersections between private, state and communal interests means that regulation is a multi-scaled domain “in various states of contest and cooperation” (Pritchard, 1999: 185). The rapid expansion and incorporation of the wine industry into global wine supply chains over the past twenty years has been accompanied by the consolidation and takeover of smaller wine producers by transnational wine companies and large retailers (Pritchard, 1999). These interface with primary producers of wine grapes which are largely socially structured through traditional nuclear families. However, as Pritchard et al. (2007: 76) explain, a ‘typical farm’ constitutes a “distinct social and economic formation in its own right” arising from an intermeshing of ‘family’ structure and ‘corporate’ systems. Pritchard et al. refer to this formation as ‘farm family entrepreneurs’ and delineate its three characteristics: farming takes place on land owned and operated by family units, the family provides the farming labour under conditions controlled by the family, and farm families draw their main source of income from the sale of agricultural outputs produced by the farm. Whilst the family unit provides the social structure of the farm and its operations, the economic processes of farm production and sales distribution are enmeshed with legal and financial structures characteristic of the wider economy (Pritchard et al., 2007). Given the intimate and complex intersections between home, business and family contextualized upon the site, or place, of the ‘farmland’, this formation constitutes more than a business or occupation to become a ‘way of life’ (Price and Evans, 2005, 2009; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). This way of life is characterized by cultural meanings and values relating to conceptions of rural idyll (Bryant and Pini, 2011), gendered identities within a patriarchal and often patrilineal system of farming (Alston, 1995; Bryant, 1999; Panelli, 2002), and a macro political-economic context (Lockie et al., 2006). To better understand farmer distress and suicide, it is therefore important to contextualize farmer’s subjective experiences within the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of farming which vary according to geographical place and type of farming.

With the introduction of neoliberal governmentality, a range of state policies that were supportive of family farming were abolished (Pritchard et al., 2007). As Lockie et al. (2006: 33) explain, “The result has been the replacement of many of the support structures Australian producers have traditionally come to rely upon with discourses and practices that extol the virtues of competition, entrepreneurship and efficiency”. The rationale underpinning the withdrawal of state support is that in order to avoid economic distortion, “farm units should persist only to the extent that they are sustained by the market” (Pritchard et al., 2007: 79).

<sup>1</sup> In Foucault’s work and in neoliberal discourse the subject is uncritically constituted as male.

As Pritchard et al. (2007: 80) observe, the net effect of these policy changes has been to “radically destabilize family farming as a social and economic formation”.

One of the ways in which agri-business has been transformed through neoliberal discourses is through a reduction of State intervention in the commercial interaction between growers and processing companies (Pritchard et al., 2007). In response, the wine industry has adopted the use of contracts between primary producers and wineries to coordinate supply. Contracts constitute a mechanism for the management of risk. As Fraser (2005: 24) explains:

A contract that guarantees grape supply in a timely manner introduces certainty into production, allows allocation of resources with greater confidence and reduces costs associated with locating grapes to be used in the production of wine. The need to secure grape supply from a particular grower may also be important in terms of maintaining wine quality and, in turn, building brand reputation.

Contracts are also intended to maintain a balance of power in the grower–winery relationship and equilibrium in pricing to avoid economic distortions created by an imbalance between supply and demand. However, there are a number of legal and practical issues related to grape supply agreements that are beyond the scope of this paper (see Taylor, 2003). In terms of the micro-politics of this arrangement, as Fraser (2005: 43) argues, “it is the winery that determines the contract terms because it is in the stronger bargaining position”. In addition, the competitive and individualized climate fostered through neoliberal discourse negates social or collective action and ensures the individualization of risk borne by farmers (Pritchard et al., 2007). As a legal framework, contracts are therefore a central regulating mechanism in the political economy of the wine industry and contract farming is of interest because it provides “an explicit rendition of how the logic of capitalism perpetuated family ownership of farms, but under conditions whereby key controls were held by off-farm interests” (Pritchard et al., 2007: 79). These structural conditions delimit farmer autonomy and choice and expose farmers to risk.

This paper draws on the Foucauldian analyses and rural studies literature reviewed to explore the micro-politics of contract farming at the local level of the Riverland wine industry within the broader neoliberal political economy of agriculture. This approach enables examination of complex intersections between the state, corporate wineries and families engaged in contract farming to understand the micro-politics of the wine industry in terms of distress experienced by farmers.

## 2. Research design

A qualitative methodology was utilized for this study as the primary focus of the research was to ascertain the perceptions and attitudes of Riverland growers in relation to the social and economic circumstances facing their industry, community and family. Data collection reflected this focus with the use of in-depth interviews (Patton, 2002) to openly allow participants to tell their stories. A flexible qualitative methodology using in-depth personal interviews encourages a trusting relationship to be built between interviewer and participant in order that complex, personal and difficult issues may be addressed within the interview. Further a qualitative approach enables the questioning of participants to continually develop through an interview process (and subsequent interviews) which in turn adds depth and richness to the data (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

This project operated within the boundaries of the University of South Australia’s Human Research Ethics Policies which included

**Table 1**  
Age and gender of participants.

Age	Men	Women	Total
25–34 yrs	1	2	3
35–44 yrs	4	0	4
45–54 yrs	7	4	11
55–64 yrs	7	4	11
65+	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>30</b>

voluntary participation and assurance to participants that in reporting the findings no identifying data would be used. As the Riverland is a small community there is a risk that composite pieces of data may be used to deduce the identity of individual participants. This article endeavours to minimize this risk through excluding or altering identifying data.

### 2.1. Study site

The Riverland is a 330 km long region of South Australia that surrounds the Murray River. It is the largest wine producing region in Australia and contributes \$299 million to the Gross Regional Product of the region and directly employs in excess of 3600 people (PIRSA, 2005). The Riverland wine region has approximately 1,100 wine grape growers who in 2012 produced over 411,000 tonnes of grapes (Riverland Wine Industry Development Council, 2009). The wine industry is characterized by a large number of small to medium sized independent vineyards with a smaller number of large wine producers. 94% of wine grape growing businesses are family owned and operated. Many of the family businesses in the region began through government assistance via the soldier settlement program after the First World War. Further development of the region occurred with the post-Second World War European immigration ‘flood’ (Riverland Wine Industry Development Council, 2005). A 2005 survey found that 28 percent of Riverland growers had been in the industry under ten years, that 48 percent had been in industry between ten and twenty-five years and 48% did not have any succession planning in place (Truscott, 2005).

### 2.2. Sample

Initial sample selection was drawn from names provided by the Executive Officer of the Riverland Winegrape Growers Association. Snowballing techniques were then used to advance wider sample selection within the community. Snowballing sample selection involved requesting participants in the project, steering committee members and irrigation organizations to provide names and contact details of potential participants in order to achieve a sample reflecting gender, age, and cultural background of growers in the region.

The interviewer telephoned all growers on the sample lists provided, to invite participation in the study. This was done after office hours to maximize the potential of contact. Where participation was agreed, a suitable time and place for interview was arranged. It should be noted that there was reluctance to participate due to recent economic/social research undertaken by government and other agencies. Some initial phone calls took up to 40 min, in order that the interviewer could establish a trusting relationship and allow the potential participant space to discuss their concerns and questions about the study.

The sample size was 30 of which ten were couples (5 couples interviewed separately). In each case the married couple farmed the landholding with the majority of the physical labour undertaken by the male ‘farmer’. Few had children who contributed



labour to the business (most either being too young or undertaking study or employment elsewhere) and family succession was not a normative feature of the business. Table 1 presents the number of participants according to age and gender. In the discussion to follow data extracts from interviews are accompanied by the gender (M or F) and age (in years) of the participant.

Participants were of Australian ( $n = 9$ ), Greek ( $n = 5$ ), English ( $n = 4$ ), German ( $n = 2$ ) and Italian ( $n = 1$ ) heritage and came from across the Riverland region (Waikerie, Loxton, Renmark, Monash, Berri and Barmera). All of the participants owned and operated land from which they aimed to derive sustainable self-employment and therefore fit the criteria for 'farm family entrepreneurs' (Pritchard et al., 2007). Land holdings, colloquially referred to as "blocks" by participants varied in size from 20 acres to over 101 acres and most growers had owned and operated the block for 20–24 years.

### 2.3. Data

Data were collected using in-depth interviews (Patton, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. A semi structured interview schedule was used to ensure the relevant topics were covered during the interview. However, the interviewer was led by the participant to determine what questions were appropriate and at what stage in proceedings certain questions were asked. This type of data collection prioritizes the meanings and experiences of participants and as such their stories and thoughts were encouraged and developed through the interview process. The interview began with the collection of some basic demographic data about the participant, their family and business. The interviews examined how growers and their families were affected by past and current changes in the wine grape industry and their plans for their business and family's future. Economic scenarios were used to ascertain how growers may respond to the challenges affecting the industries and identify possible strategies and actions which can be driven by themselves, their industries and the community in partnership with government. Given the complex ways in which economic and social processes interact in people's lives, the interviews were at times lengthy. On average the interviews lasted two hours. Many of the participants became upset, anxious, angry and overwhelmed with emotion through the interview process. It was evident that many had not spoken to anybody else prior to interview about emotional issues associated with their current circumstances. The interviewer (who is also a qualified counsellor) provided advice on how to contact professional health services, where relevant. Interviews with male and female participants generally followed a similar rhythm and pattern of responses particularly with regard to detail and knowledge about wine corporations and industry changes. In terms of married couples, overall male and female participants did not reveal different information. Both male and female participants narrated their own subjective experiences of distress but whilst men only talked about their own distress women voiced concern for their husband's wellbeing.

### 2.4. Analysis

An interpretative methodology was used to generate the analyses that involved interpreting data extracts by giving them coherent meaning using theoretical insights. The process of analysis began with descriptive and thematic stages according to the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Individual texts were coded using descriptive tags that were the same as, or close to, the language in the text. Kvale (1996) describes this process as one of determining the natural 'meaning units' in the text. Once each individual text had been coded, the texts were systemically analysed

for themes. As Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) suggest, a "theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set". Thematic analysis was therefore used to organize the data sets and identify patterns of regularity in meaning. Each potential theme was then reviewed and refined. The theoretical analysis undertaken in this study constitutes an interpretation of the micro-politics of contract farming in the Riverland wine industry drawing on insights derived from Foucault's work on political economy and rural studies literature pertaining to neo-liberalised farming structures in Australian agriculture. This interpretation focuses on issues arising from state government policy, contract farming, exposure to risk, and limited autonomy which threaten farm viability and have implications for understanding the political decisions of farmers and rendering farmer suicide political.

### 2.5. Decentralising drought: economic interactions between the state and the farmer

Amid concerns about the economic and social impacts of the, then current, drought on primary producers of wine grapes in this region, the State Government funded the study on which this article is based. However, rather than stories of drought, what emerged were narratives from both male and female farmers relating to struggles in the micro-politics of the corporate wine industry creating distress. To refocus the interview one participant succinctly stated, "*we might be cut down for a while but once we get good rains in the right places – that's not the issue, the water is not the issue. It's the wineries that are the issues*" (F 50 yrs). As the narratives unfolded across the course of interviewing it became apparent that an oversupply of grapes had impacted on the industry. Interestingly, drought was identified by many as a factor that might help reduce the oversupply rather than a source of stress.

According to participants, the oversupply of wine grapes was a result of increased planting funded by corporate investment that in turn was stimulated by government tax incentives to drive growth in the wine industry:

*agra-business where you've got big share holders, or superannuation companies investing in vineyards, you know, a good tax write-off, and they're not that fussed if they don't get a return, as long as they've got their tax write off and 'we own a bit of vineyard'* (M 58 yrs)

The increases in vineyard acreage were a consequence of tax breaks introduced in the mid-1990s and had contributed to a wine glut that pushed down prices to unsustainable levels. The tax incentives were revoked in 2004 amidst concerns of oversupply of grapes (Nipe et al., 2010). The economic effects of this oversupply were a rapid and significant downturn in prices which in the short-term meant operational losses and in the long term threatened business viability. At the time of interview, many of the growers were in the midst of experiencing large financial losses (hundreds of thousands of dollars) and were cutting back on farming practices to reduce expenditure, taking up paid employment off the land to cover day to day living expenses, working long hours and considering options for exiting the industry.

Whilst seemingly contrary to neoliberal rationalities, it is clear in this instance that "governments can, and do, intervene to regulate or control market forces" in order to boost agricultural production (Browett, 1989: 281). However, as this case attests, since the increased production was not driven by demand, and any potential anticipated increases in demand not realized, economic distortion in pricing arose due to over-supply. Moreover, as a number of commentators have observed, the structural conditions of the wine industry tend towards an oversupply of bulk varieties

and an undersupply of premium produce that an un-calibrated tax incentive fails to address (Browett, 1989).

Participants clearly attributed blame to the state for causing the industry crisis and were critical of the lack of state support for their farming enterprises and the state support granted to wine corporations. As one participant stated:

*Well, the Federal Government last year gave x amount of millions of dollars to the winery industry for marketing and sales to help them market overseas BUT it really didn't help us... they're helping that end but they are not helping us in any way. So the wineries get help from the government and yet with us they're saying 'if you can't make it just walk off the land'. (F 58 yrs)*

Government support of corporate capital in the wine industry is consistent with neoliberal rationalities that direct policies towards shaping possibilities for entrepreneurial conduct. A politics of resistance to such policies was evident in farmer's arguments that 'walking off the land' would render them no longer economically self-sufficient and having to draw on state social support.

*How many people can the government pay pensions to? We put all our money into this property because we don't want to live off the pension, we want to be self-sustainable, but they can't see that. They're saying 'if you can't get bigger, get out' (F 58 yrs)*

*Well the idea was never to get out. The idea was to set up, so I could run it from my wheelchair, and not reply on begging the government for a pension. (M 55 yrs)*

This argument is also mobilized in terms of justifying a redistribution of resources: rather than provide economic support through state welfare, growers suggested the need for economic support to continue farming. However, it is precisely this form of economic support that has been abolished through the restructuring of agriculture according to neoliberal principles.

## 2.6. Political power: contractual relationships between growers and wineries

As previously stated, the Riverland wine industry is characterized by a large number of small to medium sized independent vine yards predominantly operated by families alongside a smaller number of large corporate wine producers (Riverland Wine Industry Development Council, 2005). Neoliberal reforms of the industry during the early 1980's resulted in the dismantling of statutory marketing legislation regulating prices and conditions in order to allow a 'free market' to emerge. To avoid the difficulties of spot markets with a highly perishable product and introduce certainty into both sides of the supply chain, the industry adopted the use of contracts (Fraser, 2005). During times of success and economic growth, growers and wineries had enjoyed long-term contracts of approximately 15 years and an expectation that these would be unproblematically rolled over into new lengthy contracts. At the time of the interviews (2005) however, the oversupply of grapes had severely impacted on the contracted business relationships between growers and wineries. Many of the growers had been impacted by either a loss or suspension of contracts with wineries, and hence no secure outlet for their produce, and/or a sales price offered by the wineries that fell significantly below the cost of production.

*Well, there's no outlet. I haven't got an outlet that I know of, this year, for the grapes, and we've taken a beating in process for the last 3 years. (M 55 yrs)*

*Nothings secure. The wineries are coming back and they're saying 'we'll take your grapes this coming season but we don't know about next season' (F 58 yrs)*

Relationships between wineries and growers had become strained and the small family owned operations were struggling with a lack of power and representation to negotiate better terms in the absence of legislation or government support. One grower stated, "the wineries are like leeches, they just want to suck everybody's blood, which is very unfair" (F 58 yrs).

In terms of the politics of pricing, growers are price receivers and so are largely subject to the pricing set by wineries for their produce. This suggests an imbalance of power in times of oversupply that favors the wineries. The economic impact of oversupply on the price of grapes was described by one participant:

*[In times of normal supply one of the wineries] was offering \$1400 a ton when the other wineries were paying \$1000 a ton to get his grapes, but the minute it was oversupply, when the other wineries were still offering \$1000 a ton or \$900 a ton, I mean the price was coming down but slowly, he went from offering \$1400 a ton one year to the following year offering \$300. So straight away the following year, wineries they work on an average price, with his price being so low and there's 2 or 3 wineries doing the same thing, with their prices being so low, just dropped the average so quick within a couple of years, especially being unsecured growers because we were out of contract we're out there in the open market and subject to taking \$300 a ton and he only offered \$300 one year, the following year he was offering \$150 and then \$100, it's been like that ever since. (M 49 yrs)*

In a free market, the principle of supply and demand regulates pricing however, as this case demonstrates, complex interactions between the state, corporate wine and primary producers introduce variations through interventions that affect the balance of the equation. Whilst many of the participants blamed the state for the current crisis of oversupply, others considered the role played by wineries with a vested interest in driving down prices.

*A: the oversupply of fruit, which a lot of the people believe the wineries instigated, because they were runnin' around saying 'plant up, plant up, plant up' because the prices were high.*

*Q: Do you believe that they intended an over-supply so that they could basically dictate whatever they wanted?*

*A: Of course they did. It was the only way to get the price back down again. (M 49 yrs)*

Encouraging oversupply of product is one strategy for influencing pricing equilibrium whilst another is pricing differentiated on the basis of quality.

*The wineries promise certain prices but then your fruit has to be, it has to come up to a level where they specify that they need the colour, the sugar levels, their criteria gets harder every year. Every year they find something that you can't get to the level that they want, as in the quality, like they want this and that, they want all the quality up there, but they're not paying for what they promised. There's always some way that they get out of paying, they say your fruit is not A grade, it's B or C, and then you get this much or this less for it, so you get less. You've spent the money all year to try and get the fruit to their expectations. (F 58)*

*the way we see it the wineries used quality as a way to drive the price down and now that its down and its going to stay down, I mean they've driven the price down that far that growers can't make ends meet (F 30 yrs)*

Through audit measures of quality, wineries are able to exert tighter control of vineyard–winery linkages (Pritchard, 1999). The principle of free competition ensures that growers respond to these controls. Through the legal ability to suspend or not renew

contracts and dictate pricing, an asymmetric relation of power between growers and wineries benefits corporate capital.

### 2.7. Risky business: growers exposed to uncontrollable risk

Asymmetry in the relations of power between growers and wineries also manifests through exposure to risk whereby through the risk aversion practices of wineries, growers are subject to greater risks from uncontrollable external factors. Participant narratives reflected a high degree of uncertainty and instability in the business climate:

*We went from getting \$90,000 last year to \$30,000 for the same amount of fruit in one season and you just can't budget that* (F 44)

*they suspended our contracts, so that sort of took half of our income out just straight away, and we couldn't do anything with it, we still had to grow the fruit, and they didn't tell us until after we'd grown the fruit that they didn't want it.* (M 58 yrs)

Through lowered pricing and suspension of contracts the wineries are able to minimize their economic risks of increased supply without a corresponding increase in demand. A number of participants suggested that wineries had unethically capitalized on the situation by stating that their tanks were full of surplus wine but buying from non-contracted growers at the lowest possible prices. It also became apparent that wineries were managing risk through capital investment in growing their own produce through a policy of vertical integration. Whilst the reasons for this were unclear, this policy contributed to the risk exposure experienced by growers and “further marginalization of small-holder production” (Pritchard, 1999). A number of growers also reflected on the state's economic interest in the industry without a corresponding responsibility for risk. As one participant stated:

*we sat down and worked it out one day, we get 18 cents a bottle for our wine, and the government gets \$4.82 a bottle. I mean I'm not very good on figures but compared to them they're ripping us, the grape growers are putting all the money into doing it, they risk their whole life on the grapes* (F 50 yrs)

In terms of the economic interests in the wine industry pursued by the state, wine corporations and growers it is evident that, as has happened previously, in times of market pressure due to over-supply “the burden of adjustment has fallen disproportionately upon the independent grape growers of South Australia” (Browett, 1989: 290).

### 2.8. Exiting entrepreneurs? Limited autonomy through delimited choice

Given the context of uncontrollable risks to viability and sustained economic losses, many of the growers interviewed expressed a desire to exit the industry but felt constrained by limited options and experienced being ‘trapped’. As one participant revealed “that's the stressful part for me, now, I really need to get out, it's just that I want to, you know but can't” (M 47 yrs). For some, the financial penalty of selling during a time of decline was prohibitive: “We would love to sell but at this point you can't sell and the amount of money we knew we were going to end up losing, you can't just go out and earn” (F 44 yrs). For many the desire and actions to exist the industry were thwarted by banks who would not take possession of their land due to deflated property prices and a lack of buyer demand.

*well how do we get out of it? How do you stop? We've already been to the real estate to see whether it is an option to sell, but they're*

*saying no because there's no one out there that want to buy* (F 44 yrs)

Loss of long term investment was another constraint:

*you feel like pulling out everything but there's so much infrastructure that's gone into it. It doesn't make sense [to keep going] but I mean it doesn't make sense to do nothing either... to turn the tap off and just stand back and watch 20, 30 years of work just go down the drain* (M 49 yrs).

The image of the entrepreneurial subject governed objectively by market ‘interests’ and actuarial risk marginalizes the experience of social and emotional connections to investment in land and primary produce. Both female and male participants drew on discourses of ‘lifestyle’, which resonate with farming as a ‘way of life’ (Price and Evans, 2005, 2009; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005), and operates to anchor them to their landholdings despite hardship. These economic, social and practical constraints limit their choices and autonomy to act and complicate government directives to ‘just walk off the land’. As one participant states “But this is it you know, government is – there's nobody giving us any choice here” (M 64 yrs).

### 2.9. The politics of surviving and not surviving

A discourse of ‘survival’ shaped many of the narratives, both in terms of the economic survival of the business as well as participants’ emotional and personal survival through meeting basic needs. Participants spoke of stripping back their business and personal lives to the bare minimum needed to survive and when asked what their future plans were, many responded that they were just trying to survive. For most ‘surviving’ meant doing whatever was needed including obtaining employment external to the business and focusing on small factors rather than the overall picture and small time frames like each day or each week rather than long term. This type of ‘survival’ becomes possible because in family farms “the household and the business are fundamentally intertwined” (Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011: 277). As Overton and Murray (2012) observe, unlike large corporate wine firms, family-based rural enterprises can survive based on their flexible management of labour and management of capital and complex attachments to land (e.g. social benefits of status, stability, inter-generational transfer and lifestyle). In the context of the economic, political and social conditions being experienced by growers, discourses of survival constitute a political strategy of the self. This strategy draws from cultures of farming that emphasize resilience and overcoming hardship through dedication and hard work (Bryant and Pini, 2011). However, whilst the social arrangement and cultural values of family farming permit surviving in the face of adversity, for many in this study the emotional costs of a politics of survival were a source of distress.

Many of the male farmers described subjective experiences of intense stress and pressure in terms of disruption to sleep, lack of physical energy and motivation, physical ailment, decreased sexual appetite and for some increased drinking and smoking. For instance one male farmer states:

*You're not sleeping very well, you're very tired, you start drinking too much, your wife starts to wonder who the hell she married, stuff, anyway and then I started having problems with my health to some degree so I went to the doctor with it all cause I had fears of cancer, had pains in my body and stuff... and he said I'm going to describe some symptoms to you and he starts naming off all these things and I'm going yep, oh shit yep, yep and he said they're all classic symptoms of depression and I've always been a tough bloke or I thought I was and I'm a baby at heart.*



Female participants also revealed the concerns they held for their husbands' wellbeing:

*P: now he's dropped his bundle we're worried about him, he keeps talking about doing himself in. He hasn't got guns, and that's what I used to worry about you know, if he go that low.*

*I: Can you see him getting that low?*

*P: Oh yeah.*

*I: What's he like when he's very low?*

*P: He cries, sits, reads without reading, sleeps in front of the tele, no sex, hasn't been for probably 2 years (sobbing). Of course you can't get him to go see a doctor.*

However, female participants also talked about themselves in terms of disruption to sleep, feeling stressed and depressed:

*I don't sleep very well, thinking about it. Headaches, of course I'm stressed, because I do the books. (F 58 yrs)*

*We've been through hard times before, we'll get there, it's just sometimes it's just on the quick a bit and you think, I don't need that, or pop another St Johns Wort because the bankers are coming tomorrow and I've just got to get my head, because they frighten me. (F 59 yrs)*

Women infrequently appear in Australian or international studies relating to farming distress and when they do they are accounted for as being less likely than men to suicide or as suffering poor mental health but remaining strong to support their husbands (e.g. Alston, 2009; Alston, 2011; Berry, 2009). This literature therefore frames women as 'caring' but not 'at risk' because women identifying as farmers is still seen as an anomaly. It is therefore important to bring women farmers narratives of distress to the foreground since between 2006 and 2010 there were approximately 1000 deaths of rural women (including but not limited to farming women) officially designated as suicide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

In terms of suicide, one male participant told of his changed attitude given his experience:

*you know sleepless nights and bluin' and lack of enthusiasm in a big way and just one thing after another, you know. You keep pushing on but it's a hard battle you know. I used to say, years ago I used to say to people, you hear of people committing suicide and I used to say there's nothing in life that bad that it would ever drive you to suicide. I don't care how bad I am, whether I was diagnosed with cancer or had a busted neck and paraplegic, there was nothin' that would knock me around like that, and I mean okay, I still don't walk around thinkin' about suicide, killin' myself but I understand now how easy it would be just to swap my direction and say well bugger it (M 49 yrs).*

In this excerpt the Australian colloquialism 'bugger it' is used to signify the meaning of giving up. This suggests an escape from the 'hard battle' against political and economic forces in agriculture.

The excerpts reproduced here provide an emotionally charged glimpse into some of the subjective experiences of farming men and women during times of distress. Interestingly examination of the political economy of agriculture and its impact on the business of farming is largely explained in similar ways by women and men. Given the constrained autonomy and limited choices for exiting the industry, suicide in this context can be understood as a potential strategy for exit. Here suicide is an avenue for autonomy as well as protest against the conditions that render it an acceptable option. Such a reading need not diminish the suffering and emotional distress experienced by farmers and the implications for mental

health, but rather considers 'something else' in such actions. As Münster (2012: 198) suggests, "farmers' suicides are communicative acts that intend to do more than just end a life; they convey a message of despair and protest and, therefore, a political message". In relation to the effects of neoliberal agricultural reforms on farmers in India, Münster suggests that farmer suicides "force state agencies to show presence in social settings which they had allegedly neglected" (Münster, 2012: 185). If a discourse of survival shapes a politics for continued enterprise then the practice and discourse of farmer suicide can be construed as a politics of resistance against the political economy of agriculture.

### 3. Conclusion

To decentralize the dominant discourses of 'drought stress' in the problematization of farmer's mental health and suicides, this paper complicates and extends understandings of the political and economic contexts that can be a source of distress for farmers. The paper revealed the ways in which farmer distress is linked to a micro-politics involving farmers, transnational corporations and the state. The analysis demonstrates that whilst state intervention in the market resulted in economic distortion through an over-supply of produce, neoliberal policy limits state support for primary producers but enables support for corporate capital. Primary producers in contract farming are also subject to asymmetric relations of power that legally and politically privilege corporate wineries through the ability to suspend contracts and dictate contractual conditions and pricing. In the absence of statutory legislation governing pricing and conditions, this asymmetry in power also increases growers' exposure to additional external and uncontrollable risks that threaten business viability. According to neoliberal policy, which requires market sustainable agribusiness, the state's directive is for farmers to 'walk off the land'. However, social, economic and practical constraints delimit farmer's autonomy through restricted choices. For farmers experiencing these conditions, a discourse of survival anchored in cultural constructions of farming constitutes a political strategy of the self for continued enterprise. The emotional costs of this politics are critical to understanding distress and suicide among farmers. When the state and corporate agriculture constrain autonomy, economic conditions and ability of farmers to continue to farm, farmer's suicides are rendered political. From this perspective they can be understood as an act of agency to exit the industry and a statement of resistance to the political economy of agriculture. If as Münster (2012) suggests, such actions are used to provoke a response from the state, they require policies and interventions that reach beyond the individual and beyond the external and almost insurmountable conditions of drought and climate change.

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