

Authors: Connar McShane¹, Frances Quirk², Anne Swinbourne¹

Affiliations: Department of Psychology¹ and School of Medicine², James Cook University, Townsville

Title: COPING AND BURNOUT IN THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT.

Objectives: This research aimed to (1) investigate the coping styles or resources that were utilised by farming families and (2) evaluate the overall well-being of farming families within Australia. It was proposed that due to the complex working environment and unique stressors (such as isolation and climate conditions) that members of farming families would use unique coping resources.

Methods: A set of items were generated through interviews with farming family members (N=53) to identify coping styles and resources. An additional sample of farming family members (N=278) from across Australia were then distributed the generated item set, the Farming Family (FF) Cope Scale (N=25), the Brief COPE Inventory (N=28) (Carver, 1997), Satisfaction with Life Scale (N=6) (Diener, 1985), Kessler-10 Psychological Distress scale (N=10) (Kessler et al., 2002), and the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (N=16) (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

Results: Within the FF Cope Scale, participants indicated prioritising, remaining positive, recognising achievements, and enjoying work as some of the most useful coping resources. For the Brief COPE Inventory farming family members rated planning, active coping, acceptance, and positive reframing as useful coping styles. Unique coping styles were also generated within the FF Cope Scale, such as “Watching animals”, “Knowing you’re not alone”, and “Commitment to work”, presenting an overall theme of farming commitment and sense of community as important coping resources. Alcohol use was correlated with poor mental health history and the K-10; get away (e.g. holiday) was associated with cynicism; professional efficacy was related to accepting control and responsibility, remember past difficulties, recognising achievements, faith, sharing workload, knowing you’re not alone, prioritising, and seeking help. Participants presented a K-10 total mean of M=16.60 (SD=5.18), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS) indicated a mean score of M=25.16 (SD=6.47), and burnout indicators were high for emotional exhaustion (M=3.64, SD=1.71), cynicism (M=2.93, SD=1.38), and professional efficacy (M=5.73, SD=1.08).

Conclusions: Findings suggest that farming families utilise unique coping styles that have not been identified by previous established measures. A sense of belonging, community, and value in their work seems to increase resilience against stress and burnout. Farming families presented very high levels of cynicism and emotional exhaustion but their level of professional efficacy was also high, likely buffering the effects of stress and influencing the low presentation of psychological distress and high satisfaction with life.