

Exploring the occupational experiences of livestock farmers during drought: A narrative inquiry

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Abstract

Introduction: For much of the 21st century, Australia has endured the most prolonged and severe drought since records began. This drought has been found to have negative and long-lasting consequences upon both the physical and mental well-being of farmers and their families. To date, however, no research has examined the experience of drought from an occupational perspective.

Objective: This study aims to explore the way in which drought impacts upon the lived experience of the farming role and the way in which the occupational identity of farmers influences the meanings attributed, and response to, drought.

Methods: Narrative inquiry and thematic analysis were used to explore the experiences of drought among six farming men and four farming women from Northern Queensland.

Findings: Four inter-related themes were identified. These being: *'Becoming a farmer – Rites of passage on entry to the farming role'*; *'Farmers as guardians over the land'*; *'Drought as siege'* and; *'Leisure occupations as temporary bridges to a world beyond drought'*. Each of these themes offer insights into the way in which drought comes to be understood by farmers and, in turn, experienced and responded to.

Conclusion: By better understanding the occupational experiences of farmers during drought, resources can be more effectively targeted towards promoting occupational balance and well-being. Interventions aimed at reframing the way in which the farming role is conceptualised from a young age and supporting occupations beyond farming as bridges to the outside world may be effective in achieving positive outcomes during drought.

KEYWORDS

allied health, resilience, rural health, rural mental health issues, suicide and ageing farmers

1 | BACKGROUND

Historical records indicate that Australia can be susceptible to extended periods of drought. For example, lengthy dry periods were recorded between to mid-1920s to mid-1930s; the second half of the 1960s and between 1996 and 2010 (a period known as the millennium drought).¹ For some regions of Australia, such as inland Queensland, further rainfall deficiencies occurred between 2012 and 2016 with subtropical areas of the state continuing to struggle with severe shortfalls beyond this time.¹ At a national level, recent rainfall data show that, despite a partial recovery in 2020 and 2021, the years between 2017 and 2019 were especially dry within Australia, with 2019 being the driest year on record.² Furthermore, climate modelling suggests that the trend towards more frequent and prolonged periods of drought is set to continue in the future, with increased climate variability predicted to result in a heightened risk of extreme weather conditions within Australia.³

The impact of drought upon farmers has been the subject of a large body of health and social science research. Studies have identified a wide variety of extrinsic challenges confronting farmers that exacerbate the experience of drought. At a macrolevel, economic factors such as international markets and land management bureaucracy have been found to limit autonomy and control for farmers as they attempt to negotiate the effects of drought.⁴⁻¹⁰ Several authors argue that neoliberalist government policies compound these economic challenges by framing drought-stricken farms as failed enterprises, thereby compromising access to fiscal support and fostering a sense of failure and blame among already struggling individuals.^{4,6-11} Broad societal depictions of farmers as influential and hardy cultivators of the land have been shown to nurture a belief that farmers should prevail against adversity in producing food for the good of the nation.^{5,7,8,11-13} Although these views foster a sense of status and meaning within the farming role, research suggests that they also contribute to expectations of self-reliance, thereby preventing farmers from seeking assistance in times of hardship.^{5,7,8,11-13}

Farms constitute both the home and work environment for farmers and their families. Hence, the distress associated with drought permeates both their working and personal lives.^{4,14-17} Furthermore, complex family situations often exist on farms whereby many generations, each with a vested interest in the farm, reside on the same property. This means that work-related issues can often infiltrate the family home.¹⁴⁻¹⁸ The intergenerational nature of farming amplifies the pressures associated with drought due to the sense of historical connection and responsibility associated with familial ties to the land.^{7,8,11,19,20} For many

What is already known

- Drought can have a serious and enduring impact on the mental health of farmers.
- Drought can seem inescapable for farmers because the land is both their place of work and home.
- For some farmers, intergenerational ties to the land can exacerbate the negative feelings associated with the loss of financial viability of their farm.

What this paper adds

- Early occupational experiences play a role in shaping the way drought becomes understood and responded to.
- Drought has a negative impact on the sense of meaning and purpose derived from the occupational role of farmer.
- Enabling leisure and social occupations during drought offers temporary respite from the all-encompassing presence of drought within farmers lives.

farmers, the notion of exiting farming due to hardship is, therefore, perceived as failing ancestral chains because of an inability to maintain the farm in order to pass it on to future generations.^{7,8,19,20}

The combined effects of drought and the social, cultural and political factors that compound it can have profoundly negative impacts on farmers given their reliance on the land to support the livelihood of themselves and their families. Research shows sustained drought to have harmful effects upon the physical health of farmers^{4,13,20,21} and their emotional well-being.^{6,7,16,22-24} Indeed, for some farmers, the all-encompassing sense of failure, blame and hopelessness resulting from drought renders suicide as a seemingly viable means of escape.^{7,11,23,24}

The existing literature reveals that drought has practical, social and emotional dimensions to it, resulting in farmers experiencing difficulties that are complex and multilayered. The fact that drought permeates all aspects of farmers' lives indicates that it has the potential to have significant and far-reaching implications in relation to their sense of occupational competence and occupational identity. A possibility also exists that, key elements of the enactment of the occupational role of farmer, may offer insights as to how drought comes to be experienced. However, no current published research examines farmers' experience of drought specifically from an

occupational perspective. This research study was, therefore, undertaken with the goal of addressing this gap in knowledge by investigating the occupational experiences of livestock farmers (hereafter referred to as 'farmers') during times of drought. In particular, it set out to explore the following questions:

- In what way does drought impact upon the sense of meaning and purpose farming men and women derive from engagement in their occupational roles?
- How do farmers' occupational narratives across time shape their occupational identities and, in turn, experience of and response to drought?

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Methodological approach

A narrative inquiry approach guided data collection and analysis in this study. Narrative inquiry is 'the study of story, interpretation and discourse', focusing on the 'biographical particulars' of everyday life, as told by the individual who experiences them.²⁵ Narrative inquiry was chosen as a guiding framework in this study because it allows individuals to form their own oral history so as to shed light on their experience, as well as their identity and self-view within the world.²⁶ The methodology also recognises the reciprocal relationship between an individual and their surrounding context and the way in which this relationship contributes to experience.²⁷ Narrative inquiry research adopts an interpretivist standpoint, acknowledging the role of the researcher in bringing previous experiences, beliefs and values to data analysis. Doing so offers a multilevelled interpretation that itself is open to further interpretation by those to whom the findings are disseminated.^{26,27}

2.2 | Participant recruitment

Recruitment was undertaken purposively in order to ensure the collection of insights specific to the experience of drought.^{26,28,29} To facilitate awareness about the study, a research flyer and participant information sheet were distributed via email (sent by the Principal Extension Officer of the Department of Primary Industries, Queensland) and on relevant Facebook pages (Better Internet for Rural, Regional & Remote Australia; Ringers from the Top End). Individuals interested in participating were asked to contact the first author (KH) by email or phone. Snowball sampling was utilised as an additional recruitment method by encouraging participants to share information

with others whom they felt would provide a valuable contribution to the study.²⁶ As the study progressed, KH used targeted snowball sampling as a means of promoting diversity (maximum variation) among the sample of research participants.

Eligibility for involvement in the study was based on the following criteria:

- individuals who make a living off the land in the livestock industry;
- individuals living in a rural, drought declared area of North Queensland; and
- voluntary agreement to participate (including completion of consent form).

Individuals were considered ineligible for the study if they were younger than 18 years of age or were known personally to KH or her family (who are livestock farmers). Ten farming men and women aged 39–78 participated in this study. All participants lived on stations in Northern Queensland and were involved in either beef cattle and/or sheep production and, at the time of data collection, had been in drought for approximately 5 years. All of the men who were interviewed were principally responsible for managing the farm, whereas the women provided a critical support role to their husbands and families. A full summary of the participants' demographic details is presented in [Table 1](#).

2.3 | Data collection

KH undertook all interviews by phone. Interviews were semistructured with an interview guide used flexibly in directing conversation ([Table 2](#)). In keeping with the narrative inquiry methodology, the interview followed a broad format in which participants were asked to discuss key reflections regarding their experiences prior to and during drought. Interview questions were open-ended in order to encourage participants to share, in their own words, aspects of their experience that they considered important. The duration of interviews ranged from 1 h to 90 min. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim by KH. Verbal consent was gained prior to the commencement of each interview and then revisited upon completion so as to ensure that participants remained comfortable with the ideas discussed during the interview.²⁶ Data collection continued until KH and DL determined that theoretical sufficiency had been achieved. This was deemed to have occurred at the point at which key ideas and codes within interview transcripts recurred frequently enough to demonstrate conceptual depth of each theme.³⁰

TABLE 1 Participant demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Religious beliefs	Childhood/youth	Entry into farming	Livestock produced
Tracey	50–59	Married (Michael)	Anglican	Grew up in regional centre	Married into farming role	Sheep & cattle
Ben	40–49	Married	None stated	Grew up on family farm	Purchased farm separate to family	Cattle
Lisa	50–59	Married (Jim)	Anglican	Grew up in regional centre	Married into farming role	Sheep & cattle
Jim	50–59	Married (Lisa)	Atheist	Grew up on family farm	Inherited farm in succession lasting over 100 years	Sheep & cattle
Michael	40–49	Married (Tracey)	None stated	Grew up on family farm	Inherited farm in succession lasting over 100 years	Sheep & cattle
George	50–59	Single	None stated	Grew up on family farm	Purchased farm separate to family	Cattle
Tom	40–49	Married (Emily)	Jehovah's witness	Grew up on family farm	Inherited farm in succession lasting over 100 years	Cattle
Amanda	40–49	Married (Tom)	Jehovah's witness	Grew up in regional centre	Married into farming role	Cattle
Greg	70+	Married	Catholic	Grew up on family farm	Purchased farm separate to family	Cattle
Emily	30–39	Married	None stated	Grew up on family farm,	Married into farming role on husband's farm	Cattle

TABLE 2 Interview structure.

Just to get us started, I need to gather some background information.
How old are you?
Do you have a spouse/partner/other close family?
What's your highest level of education?
Is there any religious of belief system you feel connected to?
What's your current living situation—who lives with you on the farm?
What do you farm?
How long have you been on the farm?
How long have you been in drought for? [or] How long was the most recent drought you have experienced?
Can you tell me a bit about yourself and the property/farm?
How did you come to be here?
Did you grow up on the farm?
If so, do you have any childhood memories of drought? What stands out most for you in your memories of these times?
Tell me about your farming practices?
Why did you choose to farm?
What do you like about farming? What makes it worth it?
What makes it hard?
Tell me about the time before drought?
When did things start changing for you?
How did things change for you when the drought began?
What happened next?
How do you feel looking back?
What are your thoughts about your future on the farm?
Is there anything you would change if you could since the drought began?
Do you have any thoughts or ideas that you would like to raise, that we have not discussed yet?

2.4 | Data analysis

NVivo software© (version 11.4.1.1064) was used to assist in organising data during the analysis process. Both authors read the interview transcripts in their entirety to allow immersion in each narrative. Following this, KH and DL each separately undertook coding. A number of narrative features were examined throughout the coding process, including:

- *Chronology*—to explore the time frames and order in which events were told, with an emphasis on sequencing past, present and future ideas.
- *Context*—in order to glean information about the setting in which events took place and the way social, physical, cultural and institutional contexts shaped experiences.

- *Key milestones* across stories—as a means of understanding when and where changes to occupational routines and experiences took place, as well as what caused these changes.
- The role that *key characters* played in shaping occupational experiences.

Analytical memoing, through the maintenance of a research diary, was carried out simultaneously alongside the coding process. These memos were used to record and reflect on the coding process and map emerging patterns, categories, themes and concepts within the data.³¹ Memos were revisited and refined iteratively as data analysis.

Analytical rigour was maintained through regular meetings between KH and DL to discuss coding and emergent themes. This enabled a critique and fusion of ideas from both parties and ensured the analyses were representative of the data.²⁶ Journaling and memoing, as described above, were also used as a means of tracing the development of themes in order to further promote transparency in data analysis.

2.5 | Ethics statement

This study was granted ethics approval through the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: H6735).

3 | FINDINGS

Data analysis culminated in the identification of four key, interconnected themes. The themes were chosen because the authors considered them to best reflect how key occupational experiences across the lifetimes of the farmers who were interviewed had influenced the way in which they come to perceive drought and, in turn, their occupational response to it. An overview of each of the four themes is detailed below.

3.1 | Becoming a farmer—Rites of passage on entry to the farming role

The status of ‘farmer’ was highly valued by participants, all of whom described a strong sense of pride within this role. Most participants expressed that recognition as a farmer had to be earned through toil. In fact, one participant stated a belief that those from non-farming backgrounds could never genuinely fulfil the role, ‘...farmers are born not made. You can’t pick up a person off the street

and make a farmer’ (Greg). Others, however, were willing to recognise all newcomers to the role, provided these individuals first earned their status.

...Behind us, there’s three places that are now owned by women, and they used to be all male owned.... Those women that are here, they own it. You can see that they adapt to ... it’s basically a harsh environment.

Michael

Acceptance and recognition into the role of farmer seemed contingent on the completion of key ‘rites of passage’ through which a farmer earns their status by demonstrating hardiness and resilience. For those with intergenerational farming ties, these rites of passage occurred at a young age. Participants recounted salient childhood memories of situations in which they proved themselves as farmers. Their ability to cope with the presence of death and the act of killing during drought featured prominently among these narratives.

...I remember pulling cows out of bogs and to save bullets they’d put a short rope around the bar of the old land rover and put it in reverse flat and break their necks as they pulled them up the side of the bank...

Tom

I would go out when I was 11 and 12 and get the dead cows away from the troughs, putting cows down... And you know, we’d help kill the beasts, it was just what happened. It got dry, cattle got bogged, cattle died. And Dad had been on the land for generations, so it was just something you took as a given.

George

Completion of these rites of passage were described as equipping farmers with the self-resilience, fortitude and stoicism necessary to survive in the farming role. Participants repeatedly emphasised the necessity of being able to manage situations of adversity without the assistance of others. In fact, self-reliance became such a defining aspect of the farming rhetoric, that straying from it by admitting to vulnerability and/or seeking support was viewed as being out of character with the farming ethos.

Well basically it’s your patch of dirt that you own, everything is depending on you. Not only do your livestock depend on you, your

family depend on you. You're the mainstay and the mainstay has got to be strong.

Michael

Don't get bloody depressed when things go wrong. I've been to the school of hard knocks all my life. I'm a survivor. I adapted at the right times, and I learnt how to make do. You never have anything for nothing and never have any hands out.

Greg

As will be outlined further below, this mindset appears to serve a powerful function in shaping the response of farmers to prolonged hardship such as drought.

3.2 | Farmers as guardians of the land

Participants in this study seemed to frame their occupational role of farmer as one of guardianship over the land. They saw themselves as having a responsibility to maintain, nurture and protect the land in order to eventually hand it over to the next generation. Their role was thus perceived as being critical but temporary, with their time as guardians constituting a passing episode in the history and future of the farm.

I'm 3rd generation here.... So even though my name is on the lease I don't say that it's mine, I'm this generation's caretaker. I want to make it better for my kids then it was for me... I want the land to be in a better condition. I hope they learn a little bit of me that way.

Tom

Qualities of guardianship could also be seen in participant's strong sense of connection to the land and the way in which they nurtured and cared for their livestock.

I believe we are created from the earth and we're part of it. We can't live without the earth. The food we eat, it comes from the soil. In that way, the earth looks after us and we should show a bit of gratitude for that.

Tom

The protective element of the guardian role was evident in the perceived requirement to defend the farm from adversity. The ability to mount a successful defence was,

for some, seen as a distinguishing factor that differentiated between those who should and should not be working the land.

Everything we do is a battle for survival. It's a challenge. We've got the elements to contend with, market fluctuations, people to contend with...otherwise you shouldn't be in the industry, aye.

Greg

The depiction of the farming role as being guardian-like in nature can, however, be problematic, particularly for those with intergenerational farming ties, as observed by Lisa.

I think it goes for a lot of people on the land, the multigenerational graziers. If the drought really impacts them to point where they have to move off their property... it's not just a job to them. It's their whole identity... It was more than just the business collapsing; it was that they've failed. Their dad did it, their grandfather did it and they couldn't. And what else do they do? They know nothing else.

Lisa

Interestingly, this sense of duty was not upheld by the participants who bought into their properties, rather than inherited them. Although these individuals still maintained a commitment to the guardian role in relation to maintaining and nurturing the land, they expressed a willingness to leave their property if it did not prove to be a successful venture.

It's for sale if you want to buy it. Only because I'd like to sink my teeth into some better country...Just keep my eye out for something a little more forgiving.

Ben

If it all goes pear shaped and we have to sell out then I'd probably just get a job at a big company station...a gardener or something... Just look for a more comfortable life.

George

Overall, the tendency to frame the role of farmer as being guardian-like in nature led to a sense of duty through which participants (particularly those with

intergenerational farming ties) felt bound to the land. As will be discussed below, in times of drought, this enactment of the guardian role seemed to contribute to the adoption of a siege response, reflected in the both the farming operations and emotional state of the farming men.

3.3 | Drought as siege

Many participants likened the experience of drought to one of being involved in a war.

... And everything is just black. And I remember thinking this is what it must be like to walk across a battlefield when the battle is over and there's just dead bodies everywhere.

Tom

Participants responded to what they saw as drought's relentless attack by entering into a siege-like state, moving all livestock closer to the homestead and killing weaker stock as needed to reduce suffering and sustain the farm.

Because you're around death all the time, you're shooting animals...It will get to the stage where something will come in and, you think "it's just going to die anyway" so you just shoot it.

Michael

It's just what you have to do. It [death and killing] probably wouldn't be a nice reality for a lot of people. But you've got to be cruel to be kind.

Emily

Several participants also described how their routines became overrun with menial tasks associated with survival operations. The time-consuming nature of these tasks meant that all efforts to develop the property and land cease, with the guardian role being limited to a sole focus on survival.

And the thing with carting water is that once you start, you can't stop... you can't get behind because that means the cows have no water. So, if something else happens during the day, you don't get back from carting water until 1 o'clock in the morning.

Tom

And it's just a monotony, you just don't know how much longer you got to keep doing it. There's no end in sight.

Michael

As the drought progressed, many participants experienced the destruction of the land, death of livestock and declining business as a personal failing. They seemed to enter a state of emotional siege which accompanied the practical response described above.

When you have the drought...everything takes a step down, so you follow that step. Your cattle go from being fat and strong, to being a bit of a worry. Your mood goes down and when they start to die you go down with them.

Michael

Michael had also observed similarities in the mindsets of his neighbouring farmers.

Their behaviour was the main thing... they could become quite unreasonable and before they were not...They go inward on themselves. They lose their ability to react socially.

Michael

The women who were interviewed flagged particular concerns with their husbands' emotional response to drought, suggesting they had become unfamiliar as a friend, father and husband.

And some days I just wanted to hit him. I just thought "you don't see what you're doing." He wasn't horrible but just got in this mindset. I couldn't get through to him.

Tracey

... It was just really weird. Like an alien had invaded his body... I had no idea how to deal with him...You just kind of hoped at the end I would get my husband back and I did. But you hear some terrible stories about people that go on struggling. It wasn't a happy time.

Lisa

Participants reflected on the way in which mental health concerns became a reality for many farming families as farming men spiralled inwardly upon themselves. Some individuals discussed the idea of suicide as representing a rational escape from failure in the farming role.

We've had a lot of suicides in the bush when the drought is on. I don't really think that people get desperate when they do something like that. You just sort of have a moment of clarity... When it rains, I'll probably be back to where I was 7 or 8 years ago in my life and I've got to rebuild all of that. And then it will happen again... So why bother going through all that. I'll just get this over and done with now.

Tom

3.4 | Leisure occupations as temporary bridges to a world beyond drought

Many participants described the importance of periodic engagement in leisure occupations as a crucial means of sustaining emotional well-being during drought. These occupations appeared to allow farming men to temporarily remove themselves from the desperation of their own situation.

I'm really glad Jim has got these other interests. He's got his natural history and photography. Because it's not just about placing cattle over scales, he's got something else to aspire to and that's important to him. And that's when I knew he was getting well again; when he picked up a camera.

Lisa

The veggie garden was something...he'd get up in the morning and he'd go out, him and his father ... And this year he took over it again... and that was a wonderful thing ... he had put his thoughts into something else.

Tracey

Participants also emphasised the critical role that the wives of farmers played in fostering a sense of companionship and facilitating social connectedness within farming communities. Women discussed their role in acting as the curator of social events—such as 'grid gatherings'.

It got really, really horrible, you know. So, we just said to our neighbours one day we're meeting at the boundary grid, you just bring your drinks, just bring your nibbles, we'll

bring ours and let's, just for one night, not worry about the drought... And so it became the "grid gathering".

Tracey

Whether it was wives, neighbours or friends, every participant reflected on the integral role that being able to connect with those around them had in providing support and optimism in what may otherwise seem a hopeless situation.

I surround myself with people who have a positive attitude. Otherwise, you go downhill quickly.

Ben

Sometimes knowing that you're not the only one who's struggling was a good thing... You know we didn't all go "oh this is horrible" it was more like "it's terrible, but let's have a drink".

Lisa

As can be seen from the above, re-establishing and maintaining bridges to the world beyond farming through leisure and social occupations served an important function in countering the siege like response which otherwise enveloped the farmers during drought.

4 | DISCUSSION

A number of important implications arise from the findings of this research, many of which offer insights into potential approaches to support farmers and their families in coping with the challenges associated with drought. The tendency for farmers to adopt a stoic and self-reliant response to drought is well-documented within the research literature.^{7,8,11,16} This study adds to the evidence base by identifying how early occupational experiences and the subsequent framing of the farming role can contribute to shaping these beliefs. In doing so, the findings may offer clues as to the way that farmers themselves can take steps to relieve what can sometimes be unhelpful beliefs concerning the occupational identity of a farmer by recognising that these beliefs and expectations are often first seeded at a very early age. Alston¹¹ argues that exposing farming men to the harmful effects of their enduring stoicism through education and external support is needed in order to challenge ingrained beliefs and behaviours. Based on the findings of our study, an

element of this education might focus on the manner by which the need to 'prove oneself' as a farmer (often at a very young age) can influence beliefs and behaviours in the longer term.

Previous research has described the negative impact that drought can have upon farmers' mental health.^{7,11,17} Our findings further this point by highlighting farmers' siege-like response as leading to both physical and emotional isolation. This inward spiral, which can leave individuals virtually unrecognisable to their family and friends, points to the key importance of occupations beyond farming as a means of establishing and maintaining bridges to life beyond drought. The farmers interviewed in this study seemed to have lost all sense of the purpose and meaning normally associated with the farming role. This is, perhaps, exacerbated because farmers do not have to opportunity to separate their home and work environment and are, hence unable to escape constant reminders of drought, such as dry landscapes, business concerns and government paperwork.^{14–18,23} Participation in purposeful and meaningful occupation is recognised as an essential human need, which if disrupted or negatively altered can cause a decline in health and well-being.³² Efforts to offer temporary reprieve from the ever-presence of drought through the periodic prioritisation of leisure-based occupations may, therefore, be of some benefit to farmers social and emotional well-being. In stating this, however, it should be recognised that attempts to encourage the prioritisation of leisure must be undertaken in a way that is sensitive to the siege-like emotional state in which the farmer may present.

Our finding regarding the important role that farming women seem to play in upholding connectivity in farming communities during times of drought through the enablement of social occupations warrants attention. It points to the potential value that may be gained by supporting farming women to better fulfil this function. The large majority of published research focuses on the needs of farming men. However, resources targeted at supporting farming women in fostering community connections may also be of substantial benefit to the farming community as a whole. It should be noted that existing research has identified farming women as already taking on responsibility for a multitude of roles during drought in order to sustain the farming unit.^{4,5,21} Furthermore, research has shown that demanding routines combined with drought-related stress have a negative effect on the health of farming women, who often neglect their own needs in order to put their family first.^{4,5,16,21,33} Therefore, it is critical that any expectations placed upon women in supporting the broader community are done so in way that does not compromise their own occupational balance and well-being.

4.1 | Limitations and implications for future research

A number of limitations exist within this research. All interviews were undertaken by phone, rather than face-to-face. This meant that it was not possible to read non-verbal cues that may have been present during interviews. Although four women were interviewed as part of the study, none of the women owned their own farm. Future research investigating the perspectives of women who identify their primary occupational role as being a farmer may offer a differing perspective to the experiences of the male farmers in this study. This research also did not examine the occupational experiences of crop farmers. It is likely that these individuals would offer different insights. Given the prominent part that the wives of farmers were found to play in promoting connectedness and well-being in farming communities, research specifically examining mechanisms to support these women in fulfilling this role would be valuable.

5 | CONCLUSION

In recent decades, Australia has experienced some of its worst periods of drought in recorded history, with climate modelling suggesting that the prevalence, duration and severity of drought within rural Australia are likely to increase further in future. Such changes bring to the fore the critical importance of providing better supports to farmers, who find their livelihood and well-being threatened by the ever-present risk of drought within Australia. This study was undertaken to assist in better understanding the occupational experiences of farmers during drought in order to shed light on potential strategies for preventing and managing emotional hardship during these times.

Our research findings suggest that the way in which the occupational identity associated with the farming role comes to be known and valued by farmers may inadvertently mask loss and vulnerability during sustained periods of drought. We have argued that understanding the way in which the experiences of *becoming* a farmer go on to influence the mindset and occupational responses associated with *being* a farmer in periods of drought may assist in shaping more nuanced and targeted emotional support for farmers during these times. The study has also identified the important function that connectedness to occupations and events beyond farming can serve in promoting occupational balance for farmers during drought, again offering clues as to strategies to support emotional well-being. Importantly, however, although this study has offered early insights into the occupational experiences of farmers during drought much more needs to be known. Further research

examining the efficacy of carefully targeted, occupationally oriented strategies for promoting well-being among both farmers and farming communities during drought would offer interesting and important next steps.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kirsty Healing: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; project administration; data curation. **Daniel Lowrie:** Conceptualization; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; project administration; data curation; supervision.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was approved by the James Cook University Research Ethics Committee—Approval number H6735.

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