

**Walking with farmers and talking about suicidal feelings: An interpretative
phenomenological analysis**

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Contents

Content	Page number
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
Introduction & literature review	4
Research aims	24
Method	25
Reflexive statement	26
Theoretical foundations of research	30
Walk-and-talk methodology	33
Participant recruitment	39
Ethical considerations	43
Results	44
Superordinate theme 1	46
Superordinate theme 2	58
Superordinate theme 3	66
Superordinate theme 4	83
Discussion of results	94
Implications for Counselling Psychology	107
Limitations of research project	117
Suggestions for future research	118
Conclusion	120
References	122
Journal article	146
Appendices	169

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Abstract

There is a lack of information about how farmers in South West England experience suicidal feelings in relation to their farming identities. This study therefore adds to the limited knowledge base of the phenomenological experiences of farmers from the United Kingdom by exploring how individuals with a history of suicidal feelings and/or attempted suicide experience those feelings in relation to their identity and rural localities. This is an interview-based study using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Six male participants aged 21 and over were interviewed, all of whom had current or previous employment as a farmer in the South West of England. All interviews followed a walk-and-talk interview methodology and took place on participants' farmland. Four super-ordinate themes are discussed: 'It is not macho to talk about your feelings', 'My struggle to adapt to the changes in farming', 'My suicide was rational' and 'Feeling suicidal helped me to change my life'. These themes capture participants' struggles with identity, masculinity and shame leading up to their feelings of suicide. The final theme captures participants' personal growth since their suicide experience and their recovery. The results demonstrate a complex phenomenological picture of participants' sense of masculinity and expectations on them as farmers, which fuelled their sense of personal failure and energised their decisions to consider suicide. Results indicate that farmers' decisions to suicide are influenced by complex social and personal factors and point to an important aspect of failed masculinity. Clinical implications, limitations and avenues for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Overview

This research provides an interpretative phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of six male farmers in the South West of England who have experienced suicidal feelings during their career. The rate of suicide among male farmers in the United Kingdom (UK) surpasses that of the national average of all suicides in the male population in the UK (Office for National Statistics ONS, 2018). Each week, one agricultural worker dies by suicide (National Records of Scotland, 2017; Northern Ireland Statistic and Research Agency, 2018; ONS, 2018). Research into suicide among male farmers has predominantly focused on the practical factors, such as access to means and prevalence rates (e.g. Hawton et al., 1998). However, there is emerging international research that captures the psychological characteristics which may increase the likelihood of suicide in this population (Garnham & Bryant, 2014). This research is yet to be explored among UK-based farmers.

In the following literature review, I will present findings on the high prevalence of suicide among male farmers in the UK from quantitative and qualitative research. An explanation for these deaths will be presented from quantitative statistical findings, which focus on access to means of suicide (Booth & Lloyd, 2000), rural stress (Peck, Grant, McArthur, & Godden, 2002) and poor coping strategies as factors contributing to the high prevalence of suicide among male farmers. However, this research does not account for psychological aspects that might contribute to the high prevalence of suicides among the farming community. Therefore, findings from cross-cultural studies using qualitative research paradigms will be presented. Such findings suggest an alternative explanation for high suicide rates in male farmers, highlighting the role of farming identity crisis, masculinity,

values, morals and social status as factors that influence their suicide attempts (Bryant & Garnham, 2015). Finally, I will draw these different areas of literature together and outline the aims of the current research.

Since 1961 in England and Wales, and 1966 in Northern Ireland and Scotland, suicide has been decriminalised and, as such, the term 'commit suicide' will not be used as it implies that suicide is a criminal act and morally wrong. In this thesis, 'suiciding', 'taking their life' and 'attempt suicide' will be utilised to reflect an understanding that suicide is not a crime or a sin.

Suicide rates among male farmers in the UK and South West England

Suicide is the leading cause of death in the UK for people below the age of 50, and men working in low-skilled elementary professions such as farming have a 44% higher risk of suicide compared to the national average for all men (ONS, 2017; Page & Fragar, 2002). In the recent past, suicide among farmers has come under the media spotlight because of the increasing prevalence of such deaths among farmers compared to other occupational professions (Meltzer, Griffiths, Brock, Rooney, & Jenkins, 2008; ONS, 2017). Research has shown that suicides among farmers are comparable across all counties in the UK, although the highest number of such deaths among farmers is in the South West of England (Hawton et al., 1998). Devon has the highest overall suicide rate for male farmers compared to the neighbouring counties of Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset (ONS, 2017). Historically, male farmers across the UK are statistically more likely to end their life by suicide compared to their female counterparts (Page & Fragar, 2002). The latest statistics published by ONS for suicide (2017) recorded 942 male agricultural worker suicides in England and Wales compared to 14 female agricultural suicide deaths in the same location and period.

Quantitative explanations for suicide rates among male farmers

Quantitative research has been used to explain the higher rates of suicide among farmers compared to other occupations. Three such explanations will be outlined here: access to the means to suicide; 'rural stress' (Bossard, Santin, & Canu, 2016); and poor coping strategies for managing stress.

Access to means to suicide

Some evidence suggests that farmers are more likely to attempt to take their own lives as they have access to the lethal means that enable a complete suicide. Booth and Lloyd (2000) found that farmers are more likely to be successful at suicides because firearms, ropes and poisons are available on farms. This is further supported by an ONS (2017) review of suicide statistics between 2011-2017, which stated that agricultural workers predominantly used methods, such as hanging and firearms, which are more available for people working in this occupation than other methods, such as jumping from high places, drowning or the use of sharp objects. A recent study conducted in Australia found that people working in the farming industry who had easy access to a firearm and poisons were more likely to use these methods to end their lives than those who did not (Milner, Witt, Maheen, & LaMontagne, 2017). Milner et al. (2017) suggested that those individuals with access to such means also had greater familiarity with lethal suicide methods and greater risk overall of suicide completion.

The origins of rural stress, and rural stress as a contributing factor to farming suicide and suicidal feelings

In Britain, the relationship between rural stress and suicide was magnified following the agricultural disasters of foot and mouth disease and bovine spongiform encephalopathy

(BSE) in the late 1990s. These diseases had devastating consequences on rural communities across the UK at a time when the financial income of farmers had fallen (Peck, Grant, McArthur, & Godden, 2002). Some six million farm animals were culled and incinerated on farm premises, often in the presence of farmers, and an additional four million young animals were thought to have been killed 'at foot' (slaughtered but not counted; The Royal Society, 2002). The outbreak resulted in a loss of £3.1 billion to agriculture. The £2.5 billion in compensation given to farmers was intended to cover the cost of the slaughter and the clean-up of the animals but fell short in addressing the emotional impact of the disaster (The Royal Society, 2002).

The psychological impact of the outbreaks of foot and mouth and BSE on farmers continued years after the diseases were eradicated (Peck et al., 2002). Researchers have found that farmers internalised high levels of self-blame and anguish over the slaughter of their animals, even if they perceived that others had been responsible for the spread of the disease (Peck et al., 2002; Price & Evans, 2009). Farmers were at risk of vicarious trauma from witnessing the mass slaughtering of their livestock, many of which had not been infected with the diseases (Bossard, Santin, & Canu, 2016). Mainstream media reports at the time alluded to the socio-economic effect of these diseases on the relationship between town and country communities and were the first to highlight the impact of culling on rates and subsequent suicides among farmers (Peck, et al., 2002). The psychological and financial consequences of these diseases contributed to what was then coined 'rural stress' in farmers (Bossard et al., 2016). This term continues to be used to explain the multitude of complex experiences that lead to suicide and depression among farmers. However, it is possible that 'rural stress' has different phenomenological meanings for farmers now than it

had in the past, particularly concerning the 'BSE crisis'. These definitions might also differ from a clinician's classification of 'stress'. However, these issues are yet to be explored through qualitative research with UK farmers.

The term 'rural stress' has been used in research to represent multiple facets of farming that farmers find stressful. For example, Behere and Bhise (2009) used the term to explain how farmers who work and live on their own farms are likely to experience blurred boundaries between work, home and family life, meaning stress is unlikely to be compartmentalised to just one of these areas. Another area of potential stress for farmers is dependence on the farm to provide accommodation and income for multiple generations of farming family members. Farmers and farming families may be dependent on the farm's profitability for both financial security and the continuing financial means to maintain the farm for future generations (Ramesh & Madhavi, 2009). Furthermore, factors contributing to rural stress and suicide are often events that are out of farmers' control such as the weather, commodity prices, equipment failure, government legislation and diseases (Ramesh & Madhavi, 2009).

During recent years, agricultural farming has gone through many changes as a result of the European Commission Directorate-General for Agriculture (2000). In addition, the income of farmworkers has decreased per annum (Bossard et al., 2016). Furthermore, the implications of the UK leaving the European Union have increased uncertainty over agricultural trade for UK farmers. It is arguable that the demand on farmers to maintain their farm's viability in the context of increasing economic pressures has led to an increase in levels of depression (Hawton et al., 1998; Meneghel, Victora, Carvalho, & Falk, 2004) as well as rates of suicide (Kelly, Charlton, & Jenkins, 1995; Meltzer et al., 2008). Evidently, the term rural stress

captures many facets of stressful experience. The term has been used repeatedly in research to describe farmers' experiences and suicide rates for the past 20 years. This research aims to use phenomenology to explore the broader experience that contributes to farming suicides as well as to explore the factors that led to farmers' suicidal feelings. Therefore, the research includes an exploration of stressors.

Poor coping skills in farmers

Quantitative research has concluded that farmers are prone to high levels of stress and that poor coping strategies make them more likely to experience depression and suicide compared to the general population (Fraser, Smith, Judd, Humphreys, & Henderson, 2005). Farmers report that they often spend time in isolation and in secluded areas of the farm, which could enable an uninterrupted suicide attempt (Fraser et al., 2005). Moreover, research indicates that farmers are more likely to attempt suicide than seek help for mental health problems compared to the general population (Hawton et al., 1998). This suggests that farmers manage their suicidal feelings independently of professional assistance.

International review of research into suicide among male farmers

A wider review of the research has found that suicide among farmers is higher than in the general population of 63 different countries (Behere & Bhise, 2009; Bhise & Behere, 2016). In the following section, I will outline findings from international research that demonstrate commonalities between UK farmers and farmers abroad. I will then draw on the limitations of existing research for explaining the idiosyncratic experience of farmers as well as how the current research attempts to explore the issue using a qualitative approach.

Quantitative research from various cultures has highlighted farming as a stressful, dangerous occupation which is associated with higher rates of suicide than in the general

population (Behere & Bhise, 2009; Price & Evans, 2009). Farmers engaged in different types of farming will experience different kinds of pressures, dependent on their social and geographical locations (Booth & Lloyd, 2000). Furthermore, the high prevalence rate of suicides among male farmers in India, Sri Lanka, USA, Canada, England and Australia are comparable (Behere & Bhise, 2009), suggesting that this is a universal phenomenon.

Across-culture research into farming-related suicides has provided some possible explanations for these high suicide rates. Researchers have identified factors such as later retirement age among older farmers, meaning that their children experience stress due to remaining financially dependent on their parents for longer than would be the case in non-farming families (Behere & Bhise, 2009). Researchers working in India found that farmers reported a feeling that life was not worth living at the time leading up to their suicide attempt, yet report a low rate of psychiatric morbidity for depression (Bhise & Behere, 2016). Indian farmers report that in the years leading up to the Behere and Bhise (2009) study, suicides had been precipitated by the workforce migrating to the cities, leaving rural farms depleted of labourers. Researchers have found that both UK and non-UK farmers made their suicide attempts after a series of difficult farming related events and enduring stress (Fraser et al., 2005). Furthermore, research conducted into suicides in Australia found that farmer suicides were precipitated by long periods of drought (Gallagher & Delworth, 2003).

There are limitations to the quantitative research outlined here. Researchers have focused on the access to the means to suicide, rural stress (Hawton, et al., 1998; Behere & Bhise, 2009; Bhise & Behere, 2016) and deficits in personal resilience (Price & Evans, 2009) among farmers in the UK, Australia, India and the USA. However, researchers have not explored the

individualised experience of stress, which could account for the varying prevalence rates of completed suicide between different counties in the UK as well as non-UK countries.

There is some evidence to suggest that geographical variations between different parts of the country influence the stressors that farmers experience (Gallagher & Delworth, 2003). Farmers in the South West of England will have a unique experience of farming that differs from other geographical regions in the UK and abroad. Current findings do not shed light on the unique aspects of farming in the South West of England or account for the unusually high prevalence of completed suicides among male farmers in this area. To date, there has not been any research into the coping, rural stress and suicide among male farmers in the South West of England. Indeed, there has been little research conducted into the lived experience of farmers and their perspective of rural stress, and there is a lack of research in the UK that goes beyond the dominant explanation for farmer suicide of access to means, rural stress and poor coping skills (Garnham & Bryant, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to engage with contextual, idiographic, phenomenological accounts of 'rural stress' and to determine whether rural stress is an adequate encapsulation of farmers' suicidal feelings. Therefore, this research will attempt to offer some explanation for the prevalence rates of suicide from the perspective of farmers from the counties of the South West of England.

I will now explore existing qualitative research that has investigated suicide among farming and non-farming individuals in the UK as well as non-UK countries.

Qualitative explanations of suicide among non-farming people

The broader experience of suicidal feelings among non-farmers has been investigated using qualitative methodologies. A literature review into individuals' experiences after a suicide has found a complex phenomenological picture of personal struggles around coping

(Berglund, Astrom, & Lindgren, 2016), the desire to be in control (Skogman-Pavulans, Bolmsjo, Edberg, & Ojehagen, 2012), a loss of security and a need to seek help from professionals (Sun, Long, Boore, & Tsao, 2006b).

Berglund and colleagues conducted a review of individual experiences of suicidal feelings and attempts. They cited 15 qualitative studies, which included 196 participants from Western and non-Western countries, both men and women, aged between 16 and 91 years (Berglund et al., 2016). These authors found that participants experienced a '*struggle to maintain hope when life becomes too difficult*' and that they suffered despite feeling secure and trying to achieve emotional balance (Berglund et al., 2016, p.3). Furthermore, Skogman-Pavulans et al. (2012 p.4) interviewed five men and five female Swedish inpatients shortly after their suicide attempt. These individuals reported that their suicidal feelings were experienced as '*turning off emotions*' prior to their suicide attempt and trying to regain control in order to cope with their chaotic situations. Skogman et al. also found that at the time of their suicide attempt participants felt both out of control of their decision to live or to die at this time. Moreover, researchers in Taiwan found that 20 participants with suicidal ideation and/or attempted suicide expressed that the psychiatric ward environment offered them security and a calm place to recover and that their suicide ideation and/or attempt had led to them receiving emotional support that was not available in their usual environment (Sun et al., 2006b, p. 87). These findings illustrate a complex phenomenological understanding of suicidal feelings, in which the need to feel in control and contained ameliorates the need to suicide.

Qualitative researchers in the UK have also found that a complex emotional experience of suicidal feelings and suicide planning helped to regulate difficult emotions (Rivlin, Hawton,

Marzano, & Fazel, 2013). Researchers found that male prisoners in the UK gave multiple reasons for their attempts four weeks after surviving near-lethal suicide attempts; few could identify a single event or reason for their attempt. Furthermore, while planning an act of suicide, individuals experienced a sense of “feeling calm”, “relief” and “peacefulness” about their decision to end their lives (Rivlin et al., 2013, p. 313). Individuals described taking precautions to make their plans failsafe, and most reported that they had decided to end their lives in familiar, safe surroundings to prevent unexpected intrusions (Rivlin et al., 2013).

In sum, findings suggest a complex interplay between the need to feel secure, the management of distressing emotions and the difficult life experiences that precipitate a suicide attempt. In relation to the current research, farmers’ planning and decision-making process around suicide could be related to the emotional experience of wanting to regain control, regulate emotions, and have a failsafe action plan to end their lives, which will be explored in this research.

Qualitative explanations for suicide rates among male farmers and non-farmers

In the following section, I will provide an overview of the limited body of qualitative research that has explored how individual farmers perceive their identity, role in society, depression and moral values concerning the experience of suicidal feelings (e.g. Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Furthermore, farming has been considered a highly masculine occupation (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018) which can both exalt farmers within their community whilst also trapping them in an identity bound in duty and expectation (Villa, 1999). I provide an overview of “rootedness and routedness” in farming and its role in establishing a farmer’s masculine identity (Ni Laoire & Field, 2006, p. 108) and also present

findings which suggest that depression and suicidal feelings among farmers arise from a crisis in identity (Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Hogan, et al., 2012). Altogether, the following research offers a greater understanding and explanation of suicide in farming communities which moves beyond the psychological discourse of rural stress which has underpinned much quantitative research in the area.

Farming identity, masculinity and suicidal feelings

Qualitative researchers exploring the lived experience of farmers with suicidal feelings have found a complex phenomenological interplay between failed personal identity, farming values and masculinity. Bryant and Garnham (2015) interviewed 42 male Australian farmers, aged between 25 and 65, and found that suicidal feelings were experienced by male farmers as intensely shameful due to a perceived sense of failing their families, communities and farming values. Farmers described themselves as being in esteemed positions within their community and valorised as exemplars of masculinity, but the experience of suicidal feelings left them feeling like a “fallen hero” (Bryant & Garnham, 2015, p. 76). The experience of suicidal feelings was made sense of through farmers’ perceptions of their gender identity and socially constructed meanings of being a farmer, as well as achieving a sense of masculinity and moral self-worth. Furthermore, research conducted with older age farmers in the Midwest United States found that a loss of identity and pride, due to restructuring in the farming industry, had threatened farmers’ identities within their families, communities and histories and had precipitated their experience of suicidal feelings (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Moreover, these farmers did not consider themselves to be unwell and did not identify with notions of rural stress or depression at the time of attempting to end their lives (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). For the farmers in this study, rural stress was not a useful concept

for explaining all suicides in farming. However, suicidal feelings among farmers may be directly related to their ability to perform their role as a farmer and to perform their farmer identity (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005).

The male farmer identity has been traditionally characterised as 'hegemonic' (Ni Laoire & Fielding, 2006; Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018). Masculinity is defined as the characteristics commonly associated with men, whilst hegemonic masculinity is a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and social context that legitimates unequal gender relationships between men, women and other masculinities (Connell, 1995). According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculine traits are those that are considered 'more' masculine. Furthermore, hegemonic masculine traits are endorsed more within the farming community than other masculine traits (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018). Hegemonic farmer masculinity has been defined in the literature as being hardworking, tenacious and self-reliant, and as being reinforced by the male farmer's traditional position as head of the family and breadwinner (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018; Ni Laoire & Fielding, 2006). Ni Laoire (2001; 2002) argued that multiple, competing masculinities exist in different contexts, some of which are hegemonic, meaning that these types of masculinities are the most powerful and/or honoured within specific social contexts. Thus, it is important to understand the social, geographical and historical contexts of particular constructions of rural masculinity. Ni Laoire (2001; 2002) examined the discourses of rural young farmers in rural North Cork and Upper Swaledale, Ireland, and found that local social and cultural structures were highly gendered. In both localities, young male farmers occupied highly gendered spaces, such as pubs and male-dominated local farmers' markets and that they viewed farming as an important source of belonging and identity compared to young female farmers.

Furthermore, male farmers were identified as struggling with a loss of financial opportunities due to their rural locations and yet were less likely to relocate for better-paid occupations than non-farmers (Ni Laoire & Field, 2006). This suggests that farmers are intrinsically linked to their farming location and that it forms part of their identity.

This connection between farming locality, identity and belonging is theorised as “rootedness and routedness” (Ni Laoire & Field, 2006, p. 108). Ni Laoire and Field argue that rootedness and routedness are concepts which explain the complex social and political process that historically forms personal identity. Identities and cultures have ‘roots’ and origins that are perceived as timeless, traditional and authentic, and are often associated with place and ‘the land’ itself (Ni Laoire, 2002). Similarly, identities and cultures also have ‘routes’ and are constantly shifting due to economic, social, cultural and political patterns, which means they are subject to restructuring (Ni Laoire, 2002). According to Ni Laoire and Field (2006), roots and routes coexist and operate in all narratives of rural identity simultaneously.

In farming terms, it is argued that roots relate to the connection between place, people and belongingness, and are expressed through symbols such as the soil and landscape (Rose, 1993). According to Rose (1993), rootedness is evident in the construction of masculinity in farming that denotes a natural, biological connection to the land and reifies notions of ‘localness’. However, rootedness is not observed in isolation. It coexists with ‘routedness’ and is experienced in relation to constantly shifting economic, social, political and cultural circumstances. The constant restructuring of the rural economy means that farmers have shifted their identity to ‘business-like’ and ‘high-tech’, as modern farms and farmers have become more modernised and globalised and moved away from the bounded, traditional sense of belonging (Rose, 1993). This means that many farmers have had to cope with a

shift in 'the way things are done', suffering a disruption to connection and place (Ni Laoire & Field, 2006).

Farmers' identities are strongly associated with rootedness, tradition and hegemonic discourses of rural masculinities. In Ni Laoire's (2002) study of farmers in Cork and Upper Swaledale, participants were found to value purity, authenticity and stability, which are associated with 'the rural'. These constructions are in opposition to those of urban individuals, who value modernity, progress and change. In particular, young male farmers draw on 'cultural repertoires' in farming that originate from their local culture and society, thus reifying their rooted masculinity. These cultural repertoires are highly gendered and reflect a masculine view of farming and place. This means that rooted masculinities are bound to the reassertion of an agriculturally-based, male-dominant value system that has an identity fixed on the notion of 'how it once was' and prescribes to the golden age of farming as traditionally constructed in the past (Ni Laoire & Field, 2006). Therefore, masculinity in farming is symbolised with a powerful rootedness to land, locality and history.

The decision to leave or stay in farming is difficult for many farmers. A decision to leave will be influenced by a farmer's perception of their level of rooted masculinity; that is, the less rooted a farmer feels, the more likely they are to leave (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018; Villa, 1999). Staying behind in farming has been considered an expression of attachment to place (Ni Laoire & Field, 2006), whilst a researcher in Norway found that the modernisation of farming and changes in farmers' life modes means that entering or staying in farming is no longer taken for granted and is much more of a choice for the individual young farmer (Villa, 1999). Consequently, rootedness has become a charged issue among previous generations of farmers who may have considered farming an unquestioned and expected duty.

However, research has shown that rootedness to family farming is accompanied by feelings of “entrapment and hopelessness” as well as depression (Ni Laoire, 2001, p. 233).

Therefore, issues with adhering to rooted and routed masculinities in farming are potentially a feature of farmer depression (Ni Laoire, 2001). Furthermore, the unprofitable economic conditions in agriculture mean that some newer generations of farmers perceive farming as a ‘poisoned chalice’ (Kelly & Shortall, 2002), with males coerced by expectations of rootedness and routedness to take on the farm, keep it intact and retain family ownership despite the lack of financial reward, all of which can contribute to their depression.

In contrast to the rooted views of farmers as the head of the household, many modern farming men reported feeling ‘unmodern’ (Brandth, 2002, p. 191) and experiencing identity conflict when it comes to managing traditional views and values of farming against the current economic pressures facing farm diversification and profitability.

It has been suggested that the ways in which an individual identifies as a farmer are based on both personal expectations and values as well as those of the wider farming community (Bryant & Garnham, 2015). Researchers have shown that farmers are valorised for their masculinity and resilience (Bryant & Garnham, 2015). However, Bryant and Garnham (2015) found that when farmers felt suicidal, they described their failure to meet the social expectation of being a ‘hero’ who is masculine and/or moral as a cause of those feelings. In sum, qualitative research suggests that suicidal feelings among farmers are bound to issues of masculinity and connected to place and culture, and that the reasons given for attempting suicide are personal and related to an individual’s perception of their identity.

Crisis in farming identity and suicidal feelings

It is important to understand how farmers perceive their farming identity and what role this has in precipitating a suicide attempt. In this section, I have undertaken a wider review of the role of identity crisis and explored the ways in which ruptures to identity could cause suicidal feelings among farmers. Furthermore, I will provide evidence for why some male farmers attempt suicide whilst other farmers and non-farming workers do not.

It has been argued that the failure to maintain a farming identity can precipitate a suicide attempt for male farmers (Bryant & Garnham, 2015). Therefore, personal identity is an important concept to consider as part of farmers' experiences of depression and suicidal feelings. In some quarters of psychology, individual identity development has largely been explained by identity theory (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). According to Hogg, Terry and White (1995), identity is developed in response to and as a reflection of an individual's experience of society. Furthermore, an individual's identity comprises of multiple role identities such as their occupation and peer expectations, which can impact on their social behaviour (Hogg et al., 1995). Identity is relatively stable over time and creates coherency for the ways in which a person understands themselves in relation to their social experience, others and society (Hogg et al., 1995). According to Giddens (1991), identity coherency is achieved through an individual's ability to maintain a personal narrative. Furthermore, when identity is successfully achieved, it offers security that carries an individual through periods of transition, crisis and high-risk circumstances (Giddens, 1991).

A loss of role identity, such as a change in one's occupation (for example, from farmer to non-farmer) can result in a loss of personal identity coherence, a rise in anxiety and a reduction in self-confidence (Hogan, 2001). Lack of coherency has been argued to make it

difficult for people to accurately perceive and manage problems, thus leading to feelings of shame, invalidation and failure (Hogan, Scarr, Lockie, Chant, & Alston, 2012). According to Warren (1991), enduring insecurity in personal identity can cause a rupture and failure in subjectivity, also referred to as nihilism.

Nihilism represents a failure to account for the changes that occur in one's life and can cause an individual to have a rupture in their identity. In most cases, the individual learns to accommodate these changes by acting to form a new identity and adapting their role identity to overcome the rupture (Hogan et al., 2012). However, failure to adapt one's internal framework of identity and role identity can result in a crisis of subjectivity and subsequent suicidal nihilism (Hogan et al., 2012). Hogan et al. used this theory to explain suicides among male Australian farmers at a time when they were contemplating suicide. These authors argue that farmers experience a crisis in subjectivity when they feel disconnected from their identity and role as a farmer. Hogan et al. (2012) highlight that Australian farmers who felt suicidal had experienced a decline in the economic importance of agriculture farming and had had to reconcile this with a simultaneous decline in social status. These factors disrupted farmers' sense of having an important occupation within their community (Hogan et al., 2012). Hogan et al. argue that these factors increased a sense of shame and that farmers withdrew to reflect on their worth and perceived sense of failure as a farmer. The experience of the rupture in identity increases the likelihood that farmers will seek ways to escape their feelings of shame and failure by considering suicide (Hogan et al., 2012). Therefore, the existential experience of suicide among male farmers is deeply connected to a farmer's perceived personal identity and role in society.

Qualitative research into suicide has utilised methodological approaches such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA is a popular research method for counselling psychology as it is consistent with the philosophical foundations of this discipline, which are concerned with meaning, context and subjectivity (British Psychological Society, 2014, 2017; Division of Counselling Psychology, 2019). In the following section, I will present findings from existing literature that has utilised IPA to investigate the phenomenological experience of suicide and make a case for using IPA to investigate suicidal feelings among male UK farmers.

Rationale for qualitative research into suicide and counselling psychology

The research utility and implementation of IPA has been demonstrated in various studies across counselling psychology, including research on lesbian, gay and bisexual clients' experience of therapists' sexual orientation (Bafiti, Viou, & Tarasis, 2018), counselling psychologists' experience of clients with trauma (Marriman & Joseph, 2018) and counselling psychologists' experience of clinical supervision (Risq & Target, 2008). Palmieri (2009) conducted an in-depth IPA of counselling psychologists' experience of the death of a terminally ill client, identifying themes of 'working in a dying space' and 'dynamic between professional and personal identities'. Based on these findings, the author suggested ways that counselling psychologists can prepare for working with terminally ill clients as well as how they may experience the loss of a client (Palmieri, 2009).

IPA has been utilised to provide an in-depth account of the experience of suicide from the perspective of individuals who have attempted suicide (Gajwani, Larkin, & Jackson, 2018; Rasmussen, Haavind, & Diesund, 2018) and from the perspective of individuals close to the

those who have completed suicide (Rasmussen, Dyregrov, Haavind, Leenaars, & Dieserud, 2018).

Gajwani, Larkin and Jackson (2018) used IPA to explore the experiences of seven male individuals with a history of psychosis and suicide attempts. The research explored suicide in the context of psychosis and found that the men struggled to make sense of the intrusive psychotic experiences which preceded their suicide attempt. Thus, suicide was seen as an escape from their conundrum while, in contrast, attainment of hope was achieved through the sharing of their burdens and the finding of a sense of belonging (Gajwani et al., 2018).

These findings are supported by those of Rasmussen et al. (2018). Rasmussen et al. used IPA to analyse interviews with family members and the suicide notes of eight male suicide attempters and found that masculinity was central to the men's avoidance of seeking help as well as the triggering of a suicide plan (Rasmussen, Haavind, & Diesund, 2018). Themes such as 'suicide was a compensatory act of masculinity', 'when hope is gone' and 'weakness is never allowed' were identified as reasons for participants' attempt suicide (Rasmussen et al., 2018 p. 333).

IPA has also been used to explore suicide from the perspective of individuals who were close to those who have completed suicide. Rasmussen et al. (2018) utilised IPA to examine the suicide notes of 10 men aged between 18 and 30 who had completed suicide despite no previous suicide history. These authors conducted 61 in-depth interviews with closely connected individuals as well as analysing the suicide notes of the deceased (Rasmussen et al., 2018). The researchers concluded that suicide was preceded by the individuals' transition to adulthood having been marred by personal defeat as well as by discrepancies

between their actual performance and their ideal self, sense of failure and struggles with feelings of loneliness and self-rejection (Rasmussen et al., 2018).

While IPA has not been used to explore farmers' experiences of suicidal feelings, other phenomenological approaches have been used to research this subject. For example, Bryant and Garnham (2015) utilised an interpretative methodology similar to IPA in their study of male farmer suicide in Australia and found a complex connection between subjectivity, moral worth and relational breakdowns that preceded their rationale for suiciding. This qualitative, interpretative methodology provided a unique insight into the farmers' experiences and provided a strong basis in which to conduct the current research using the qualitative methodology of IPA. Furthermore, suicidal experiences have been well researched using IPA and qualitatively similar methodologies. However there has been no research conducted into the suicide experience of farmers from the UK or specifically the South West of England, an area of the country which has among the highest rates of suicide among farmer.

Summary of literature review and aims of the current study

In summary, a substantial body of evidence suggests that farmers are more likely to die by suicide as they have access to isolated areas, the means to end their lives (Fraser et al., 2005; Hawton et al., 1998) and environmental stressors that make suicide more attractive (Behere & Bhise, 2009; Price & Evans, 2009). Furthermore, male farmers can experience suicidal feelings as shameful (Warren, 1991), while the decision to suicide is deeply connected to their sense of identity and masculinity social status (Bryant & Garnham, 2015;

Hogan, 2012) as well as being embedded in the context of farming and farming culture (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005).

Research aims

The aims of this study are as follows:

- To phenomenologically explore the individual experience of suicidal feelings among male farmers in the South West of England.
- To gain an insight into how farmers make sense of feeling suicidal in the past as well as whether they perceive any act of attempted suicide to have impacted on their identity as a farmer, their values, or their sense of shame and masculinity.
- This study will contribute to this area of psychological research and the counselling psychology arena by exploring this topic in an underrepresented population of male farmers without inducing any risk to those farmers.

Concerning impact/dissemination, the research also aims to:

- Provide clinicians with an understanding of what it means to feel suicidal as well as to be a male farmer in South West England.
- Help improve relational approaches in psychological practice (such as psychological therapy) and inform the practice of healthcare professions including GPs, psychologists, counsellors, and farming outreach workers who support farmers in discussing their psychological distress and averting suicide at times of distress.

Method

This research is based on 'walking and talking' interviews with six male farmers living and working in the South West of England. Data were analysed using IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Prior to conducting this research, all procedures were granted full approval by the UWE Health and Applied Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) (appendix 1). The research complies with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

The counselling psychology profession values the importance of the scientific-practitioner model (Strawbridge, 2016). Counselling psychologists' values include the prioritisation of an individual's subjectivity and intersubjective experience (Kasket, 2016). However, counselling psychology is not just a profession with a set of values. Rather, it is the practical application of these values that aligns them into the meaningful actions of counselling psychology researchers (Cooper, 2009). Qualitative and intersubjective research methodologies are more relevant to counselling psychology practices as these methods are suitable for studying the self-conscious, subjective experience of individuals (Strawbridge, 2016). Moreover, much qualitative research is idiographic and focused on the detail of subjective experience rather than on generating general scientific laws about human behaviour (Strawbridge, 2016).

Reflexive statement

In this section, I will describe my motivations for choosing this research topic, my experience of farming and living in Devon as well as my position as an insider/outsider researcher.

Furthermore, I feel it is important to identify my relationship to this research topic as well as how my position as a member of the community from which the participants were sampled and as a researcher with a non-farming occupation have influenced my decision to research suicide in male farmers the South West of England (SWE).

There is an assumption that bias or skewedness in research is undesirable, yet as Malterud (2001) writes, "Preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them" (p. 483). Thus, this reflexive statement attends to the context of my knowledge about farmers and my position as the researcher in relation to the findings.

Qualitative research such as this project, which utilises IPA, is intended to understand the world of the participant. This understanding can only be achieved through the engagement and interpretation of the researcher with participants' accounts (Strawbridge, 2016). As discussed by Heidegger (1985), any interpretation will be founded on any fore-concept of knowledge. In other words, the researcher and indeed the reader will bring their prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions to the encounter, which will influence any new experience in light of their own experience. In line with these ideas, counselling psychologists recognise their pivotal role in intersubjective experience, while collaborative formulation development is achieved between those taking part as they derive understanding (BPS, 2017). Moreover, counselling psychologists are reflexive practitioners who recognise that they inevitably bring aspects of themselves to the interpretative process.

My motivation for this research

Central to my motivation for exploring the experience of suicidal feelings among male farmers was my own experience of a male farmer ending his life by suicide in my local community. The experience was shocking for our community and motivated me to attempt to understand the experience of suicidal feelings and its prevalence in the South West of the United Kingdom. I have married into a family with a history of dairy, beef and sheep farming, and the family farm was severely affected by foot and mouth disease in 2001, a farming crisis that, as noted above, is associated with mental health problems and several cases of suicide (Convery, Bailey, Mort & Baxter, 2005).

As a counselling psychology professional doctorate trainee, I was motivated to try to understand the lived experiences of farmers and the sense they made of their own suicidal feelings. I identify as a white British, middle class, heterosexual woman. I have worked in the National Health Service for 15 years, specialising in mental health. I have worked with people who have been hospitalised for suicidality and severe depression. I have lived experience of depression, although I have never felt suicidal. I have lived in mid-Devon all of my life and I am an active member in my community.

Insider/outsider researcher position

The issue of researcher membership with the participant group is relevant to all qualitative research approaches, and a critique of researchers' roles has developed in response to a greater awareness of situational identities and the perception of relative power (Angrosino, 2005). Postmodernism emphasises that it is important to understand the researcher's context and make this known to the communities they study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In the

following section, I have outlined my position as both an insider-outsider research and the implications of this on the research process.

I share the experience of living and working in the South West of England with the participants I interviewed. As a member of this community, I would consider myself an 'insider' researcher in some ways who can relate to some of their experiences. An insider is a researcher who shares characteristics with participants (such as ethnicity, ability, class or gender; Gair, 2012). I share some demographic characteristics with the participants in that they are all white-British, have lived in the South West of England all of their lives and were able-bodied.

In other ways, I conducted this research from an 'outsider' position. An outsider researcher is someone who does not share characteristics with their participants (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). I was different from my participants because I am female, my primary employment is not farming related and I was not born into a farming family.

I believe that the differences between the participants and me meant that there were barriers to fully understanding their experiences. However, according to Griffiths (1998), whether a researcher is an 'insider' or 'outsider' is an epistemological matter, and a researcher's position in relation to their participants will influence the knowledge that is co-created between them. Research has been conducted into the advantages and disadvantages of these opposing researcher positions. It is argued that insider researchers have a privileged position when conducting qualitative studies, particularly when they share their insider status with their participants (Perry, Thurston, & Green, 2004), as such a status can be useful in the development of research questions, designing interview schedules, accessing and assessing potential participants as well as analysing data (Court & Abbas,

2013; Gair, 2012; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). In relation to the current study, sharing my insider position as a living in the South West of England and who has married into a farming family helped to build a rapport with the participants and was useful when analysing the data.

Outsider researchers are also suggested to have some advantages. Outsiders are perhaps more able to make observations, draw conclusions and ask questions to explore topics in depth as a result of their perspective, as well as to gain more insight about less obvious features that an insider might overlook (Hellawell, 2006; Hayfield & Huxley 2015; LaSala, 2003). Following reflection of my experience conducting these interviews, I would agree that my outsider perspective enabled me to be more curious about topics I did not understand. Moreover, I felt more able to ask participants to clarify their feelings, which led to a deepening of the topic and my understanding of the participants' phenomenological experiences that may have been overlooked from an insider research position.

There are limitations to 'insider/outsider' position in qualitative research. This dichotomy is too simplistic concerning the identity of participants, as a researcher is rarely one or the other (Gair, 2012; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). An outsider research position has been problematised, as it is argued that these researchers will be unable to understand the individual experience of participants who are different from them (Bridges, 2001; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Pitman, 2002). Thus, to overcome the limitations of outsider researcher, the outsider must acknowledge and address the psychological and social differences between themselves and the participants in an ethical way that ensures their research is culturally sensitive and portrays precisely the lives of the participants (Bridges, 2001). Highlighting

diverse aspects of ourselves can demonstrate the complexity and multiplicity of identities and how these intersect with others from different backgrounds (Fish, 2008).

Examining the ways in which one's background influences the research is an essential element of a researcher's reflexive practice (Court & Abbas, 2013). The interview questions were drawn from my experience of living in rural Devon in a community of busy farmers. My outsider position and knowledge of the farming identity meant that my interview questions reflected my curiosity to explore how farmers' experienced their role as a farmer in rural locations and how feelings of suicidality influenced their sense of self because this was not something I had experienced. As suggested by Court and Abbas (2013, p. 481), "the story is both the participant's and the interviewer's". I acknowledge that in qualitative research, the researcher's background influences every aspect of the research. However, it is the participants' narrative that I seek to explore. Thus, part of what unfolded in this research was the deepening of my awareness of farmers' struggles with isolation, depression and loss of personal identity as well as a greater awareness of my own outsider subjectivity concerning the participants.

Theoretical foundations of the current study

The methodology for this research was IPA (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a qualitative approach with a particular psychological focus on how people make sense of their experiences through 'giving voice' (conveying and reflecting on participants' claims) and 'making sense' (offering an interpretation of participants' claims, potentially using psychological terms; Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 101). Therefore, the theoretical underpinnings of this study are shaped by IPA's idiographic and hermeneutic origins, which are its key conceptual touchstones (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Phenomenology is the philosophical study of

'being' (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). In particular, IPA draws on phenomenology as developed by Heidegger (1985) and Merleau-Ponty (1962). For Heidegger, people are inextricably linked to the world and others, whilst for Merleau-Ponty, people are also always embodied (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Phenomenology focuses on the worldly and embodied nature of experiences that are situated in a certain context (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). According to Larkin and Thompson (2012), this position is referred to as 'hermeneutic phenomenology'; they emphasise that "while phenomenology might be descriptive in its inclination, it can only ever be interpretative in its implementation" (p. 102). Therefore, IPA conveys the complexity of participants' experiences whilst respecting participants' individuality and how the broader social context impacts on them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

IPA, like all qualitative research, is underpinned by ontological and epistemological assumptions that set it apart from quantitative, experimental research. IPA is an interpretative (aka hermeneutic) phenomenological approach which is used to understand a person's relatedness to the world and what is important to them through the meaning that the individual makes (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

I have conducted this study using IPA from a critical realist position (Houston, 2014). Critical realists do not infer a single reality (Houston, 2014). In essence, critical realists propose that an external reality (for example, people's feelings) exists and provides a foundation for knowledge that we can relate to, and that this knowledge is only partially accessible to the researcher. Therefore, critical realism proposes that knowledge is derived from the context and reflects the researcher's position, meaning knowledge is always provisional (Madhill et al., 2000). Critical realism underlies different qualitative approaches, including IPA (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

IPA was considered the most appropriate methodology for exploring experiences of farmers' of suicidal feelings as it focuses on understanding and emphasises both the thematic (shared meaning across individual accounts of experience) and the idiographic (unique features of individual accounts of experience; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Therefore, the method has the proclivity to investigate the nuances and convey the complexity of the participants' experience.

IPA is one of several phenomenological approaches to qualitative research, which are used for exploring the 'person in context' or 'being in the world' (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). These terms are used to emphasise the mutually constitutive importance of the individual and the social – that is, it is not possible to remove the individual from their context (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). Smith describes IPA as a method which attempts to “unravel the meaning contained in within someone's experience through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts and transcripts” (Smith, 1997, p. 189). Smith (1997) describes a systematic process in which the researcher identifies themes within a participant's transcript and integrates these into meaningful clusters, firstly within the interview, and later across all the participants' interview data. The procedural steps of IPA that I followed in this research are described in more detail later in this section.

The primary research focus of IPA research to date has been exploring people's lived experiences and the meaning people attach to those experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA is based on a model of the person as a self-reflective, self-interpretative being who can reflect on and interpret their experiences in an attempt to make sense of them (Smith at al., 2009). The attempt by the research participants to understand their

experience highlights IPA's second theoretical axis, i.e., analysis of experience is an interpretative activity. Furthermore, IPA employs a 'double hermeneutic'; that is, the researcher is engaged in trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experience (Smith & Eatough, 2016). The information generated through IPA is reflexive and dependent on the researcher's standpoint (Allan & Eatough, 2016).

IPA researchers value the importance of the idiographic, situating participants in their contexts and exploring personal experiences. IPA is utilised to examine themes from an individual narrative before exploring more general themes across all participants. This is achieved through the researcher conducting and transcribing in-depth interviews and analysing interview transcripts to identify themes that capture participants' experiences. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews are considered ideal for data collection in IPA as they enable the collection of verbatim accounts (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, 1995). Semi-structured interviews focus on gathering rich accounts of individual experience (Larkin et al., 2006).

Rationale for walk-and-talk interviews with farmers about suicidal feelings

In the following section, I present a rationale for using walk-and-talk interviews to overcome the challenges of recruiting male farmer participants and help participants feel more relaxed during the interview. I then summarise the literature surrounding walk-and-talk interviews as well as the use of this method in psychological research. Finally, I explain why this method was useful for exploring the lived experiences of the farmers in this study.

I was aware of the challenges of recruiting men to participate in interview-based research which has a focus on emotions (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Kung, Pearson, & Liu, 2003; Liddon, Kingerlee, & Barry, 2018) and was mindful that interviews about suicidal feelings were likely

to elicit feelings of shame and embarrassment for some participants. Research into men's feelings around talking about sensitive topics has demonstrated that men fear becoming emotionally exposed (McCarthy & Holliday, 2004). Furthermore, some men fear being perceived as too feminine when they become emotional whilst help-seeking, which can lead them to avoiding seeking help for their distress (Kierski & Blazina, 2010).

Recruiting male farmers for an interview study was likely to be challenging. Farmers are a hard-to-reach population and rarely present at their GP surgeries for psychological support (Alston & Kent, 2008; Hawton et al., 1998). Moreover, farming is a busy, time-consuming occupation and farmers were unlikely to travel long distances to come to an interview. Therefore, I considered methods of interviewing that were most likely to put participants at ease and manage their need for convenience. My intention was to reduce the level of threat associated with the research and increase participants' comfort by allowing them to determine where and how the interviews took place. All participants chose a 'walk and talk' interview (Capriano, 2009).

Walk and talk interviews were first used as an ethnographic research tool that could be utilised to demonstrate the transcendent and reflexive aspects of an individual's lived experience in relation to their environment (Duneier, 1999). However, they did not initially include interpretative interviewing techniques (Kusenbach, 2003). Walk and talk interviews with interpretative interviewing techniques, also referred to as the 'go along method', were first identified by Kusenbach (2003) as a qualitative research method which is useful for establishing how individuals understand and engage with their physical and social environments in everyday life. More recently, walk and talk interviews have become a form of qualitative interviewing that involves the researcher accompanying an individual or

participant on a 'natural' outing (Kusenbach, 2003). According to Capriano (2009), walk and talk interviews offer an advantage when trying to explore the role of the place in the participant's everyday lived experience compared to observation alone. By asking questions, listening to and observing participants' interactions, the walk and talk researcher can actively explore participants' stream of experiences and practices as they move through and engage with their social and physical environment (Kusenbach, 2003).

According to Kusenbach (2003), the unique aspect of walk and talk interviews is the ability to observe participants' behaviour in situ whilst simultaneously accessing participants' interpretations. Thus, these interviews are a hybrid of participant observation and interviewing. Researchers who use this method spend an extended period with their interviewees, thus gaining the interviewee's insights of the experience in breadth and depth (Kusenbach, 2003). Walking interviews are also known as 'natural' go alongs/walk and talks as the researcher follows the interviewee closely while they are behaving in their familiar environments as they would do at any other time (Kusenbach, 2003).

Despite their utility for studying interactions in the context of people's environments, there is limited literature on the implementation of walk and talk interviews in psychological research. The interview technique has been used to explore LGBTQ people's experience of safety, resources and support in their community in the United States and Canada (Porta et al., 2017). According to Porta et al., this methodology allowed participants to feel more comfortable while affording additional opportunities for them to feel empowered and in control of the interview as they could control what was said and where it was said. Moreover, the interviews produced broad, rich insight into experiences of this LGBTQ community (Porta et al., 2017).

It has been posited that there are many advantages to using walk-and-talk interviews, rather than seated interviews, in psychological research (Solnit, 2001; Carpriano, 2009; Evans & Jones, 2011). For example, it has been argued that richer data is generated through walk and talk methods than seated interviews as the participant is connected to the setting in which their experience is derived and the setting can offer an insight into the experience of the participant beyond the narrative being explored (Solnit, 2001). Participants feel a greater sense of control over more elements of the interview process as they decide where to lead the researcher (Carpriano, 2009; Evans & Jones, 2011), what they say and where it is said (Porta et al., 2017). This is because the interviews take place in the landscape of participants' everyday working lives. Furthermore, walk-and-talk interviews allow for the human body to be included in the conceptualisation of knowledge and the effects of social, space and place on health (Miaux et al., 2010). As described by Raveneau (1999), walking is an experience that is first experienced as the body in motion and through the senses before it is considered intellectually. Thus, walking awakens our senses to the vista around us and the experience of the body's movement through space and context. Furthermore, walk-and-talk methodology in psychological research enables findings to be contextualised to the lived experiences of the person and place in which these feelings are experienced.

Walking-and-talking interviews have been found to be useful in psychological research. Qualitative thematic research conducted by Eisenberg, Garcia, Frerich, Lechner & Lust, (2012) using walking-and-talking method interviewed 78 students at university about sexual resources on campus. The method enabled the researcher to obtain sensitive and personal accounts relevant to the participant's environment as well as promoting participant recall as they move through spaces whilst responding to the interviewer's questions (Eisenberg, Garcia, Frerich, Lechner, & Lust, 2012; Garcia, Eisenberg, Frerich, Lechner, & Lust, 2012).

Moreover, Porta et al. (2017) qualitative research utilized walking-and-talking interviews to explore how 66 LGBTQ adolescents felt about their sexuality and personal safety in their community. The researchers found that walk-and-talk interviews enabled participants to discuss visual cues in more depth as well as to consider whether a cue was experienced as 'safer' in the context in which it was experienced, which these researchers argue would not have been accessible in stationery interviews. It has been argued that studies which utilise stationery interviews miss visual-spatial cues as the participant is not prompted by cues they would see if they were interviewed moving through the environment (Garcia et al., 2012).

This study into farmers' experience of suicidal feelings in the South West of England is original in its design as it incorporates walk and talk interviews to engage with participants. These interviews provided a context for the farmers' narratives and created a relaxed and informal research experience. Moreover, farmers are continuously connected to their environment, which is experienced through their bodies as well as intellectually, meaning it made sense to include this element in the research process. In particular, meandering around the farms led to spontaneous discussions about workload, loss of livestock and use of outbuildings to avoid problems the participants were facing. The interview method was a unique feature of this research and testified to the method's usefulness for contextualising lived experiences to place and person.

Using visual methods in walk-and-talk interviews

Qualitative interviews do not just rely on the verbal accounts of participants to describe their experience; they can also include the use of imagery (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The use of visual imagery, such as photo-elicitation techniques, in which photographs are used in

addition to verbal interviews, has become increasingly popular in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005; Reavey & Johnson, 2017).

According to Linesch (1994), the benefit of using visual approaches in research is that they allow people to tell their stories in a way that cannot be conveyed in words, thus enabling researchers to access forms of understanding and interpretation that encompass a greater depth of experience than verbal data alone (Frith et al., 2005).

An example of this can be found in Malson, Marshall and Woollett's research (2002) into the experience of how adolescent girls rationalise their dress code practices through the use of photo-diaries. This visual method provided the researchers with insight into how adolescent girls manage issues of femininity, expectations of womanhood and social expectations across different cultures. Presentation of research findings in a visual and verbal format can lead to wider engagement with the topic being explored (Frith et al., 2005). A review of the literature did not find any published research that has used visual approaches to explore the mental imagery associated with suicide. Therefore, this research is providing a novel insight into the phenomena of suicide-related imagery by integrating visual materials into the methodology.

I was particularly interested in how imagery played a role in participants' experience of their suicidal feelings. I did not want to define the types of imagery that should or should not be presented and discussed in the interviews. Instead, I hoped discussing mental imagery would provide another platform for understanding why participants felt suicidal and what sense the participants made of the mental imagery they experienced.

According to Temple and McVittie (2005), visual material in qualitative research can be used in two distinct ways to gain different kinds of insight into the participant's experience.

Firstly, visual methods can be used as a trigger for stimulating conversation and as a medium in which participants can create their own meaning of the event. Alternatively, and in conjunction with the former, visual methods can use material that is already part of the research topic under study, while participants can use the visual in their communications about their experience of the topic. During the current interviews, a discussion determined the meaning of the images for participants. How this was achieved during the interviews is explained in 'approach to using walking and talking interviews in the current study' section of methodology.

Participant recruitment

There are no widely agreed criteria for suitable sample sizes in qualitative research or IPA specifically (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. recommend a small sample size due to the idiographic focus of IPA. In particular, they recommend a sample of six to 10 interviews for a professional doctorate study. Once I had completed six interviews, I reviewed the data set with my supervisors, and it was agreed that enough data had been generated for a rich and complex account of the men's experiences and that data collection could therefore cease.

Sampling strategy

For this research, purposive criterion sampling was used. Purposive sampling is the selection of participants based on their ability to provide data-rich information in relation to particular phenomena (Patton, 2002). In this study, sampling focused on male farmers with a history of suicidal feelings living in the South West of England. Participants were selected on the basis of inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Appendix 2 for full details). All participants were male and had a current or previous occupation in farming. Participants

lived in the South West of England and identified as having at least one experience of feeling suicidal in the past. All participants self-defined as having recovered from depression.

Existing research demonstrates that people who feel suicidal do not necessarily present at healthcare services (MaSH, 2012). Therefore, all participants were recruited from non-clinical settings and specifically through a national charity organisation, the Farming Community Network (FCN), which supports farmers at times of crisis. Caseworkers at FCN provided participants with introductory material about the research aims and recruitment criteria to participants in the South West only. FCN caseworkers referred participants to the research by providing them with a research flyer (see Appendix 3) or by asking them to contact me directly. All participants were recruited through FCN. Six participants were referred and participated in this research.

Characteristics of the sample

The six male farmers recruited for this research were aged between 22 and 65 years old. All were born and lived in the South West of England and identified as White-British.

All participants identified as having previously experienced suicidal feelings. Four stated that they had seriously considered and planned a suicide attempt. All self-defined as having recovered from depression. Five of the participants were currently employed in farming. One participant had left farming several years before the interview.

Prior to participation, all farmers were asked to read an information sheet and complete a consent form provided to them by FCN caseworkers (see Appendices 4 and 5). All participants were a minimum of 18 months since participants' last suicide attempt (if they have attempted suicide previously), and all presented as low risk at the time of screening. Before the interview, I contacted the participants and completed a brief risk screening tool

(see Appendix 6). Within this screening, participants were asked to give details about their current risk to themselves. All participants completed this questionnaire and were deemed to be at a low risk of self-harm or suicide at the time of interview.

Approach to using walking and talking interviews in the current study

All participants were given the option of an interview at home on their farm or at the Devon Rural Hub (see Appendix 4). All interviews took place in the farm environment where the participant felt most comfortable and in a setting that was related to their experience of being a farmer.

Prior to commencing the interviews, consent was confirmed on all participants' audiotape recordings. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research both before and after the interview.

Interviews were audio-recorded using devices attached to the lapels of myself and the participant. Two devices were required to ensure all the dialogue was recorded and background noise minimised. I transcribed the interviews for analysis using the notation system of orthographic transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

All information that could identify the participants was anonymised or removed when interviews were transcribed. All participants chose a pseudonym for their transcript.

Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes; the shortest was 70 minutes and the longest 110 minutes. The completion of all six interviews generated 243 pages of transcription for analysis.

All participants were given the option of a 'check-in' post-interview to assess their wellbeing and have any questions answered, none of the participants required this. All participants

were provided with a debrief form which included my contact information and supervisor information as well as support services available in the local area (see Appendix 7).

The interview guide consisted of pre-planned, open-ended questions (see Appendix 8). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview format allowed me to also ask unplanned questions and respond to the participant's developing narrative as the interview progressed (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Smith, 1995). The guide started with questions about the experience of farming in the South West of England and the participants' experiences of the high prevalence rates of suicide in this area. The questions then asked specifically about the experience of feeling suicidal and attempting suicide. I had structured the questions to explore the meaning of suicide, how this related to participants' identity as a farmer, the types of imagery they associated with suicide and how this influenced their decision to suicide. The final questions focused on recovery from the experience of suicide as well as what did and did not help participants at the time.

Prior to each interview, participants were contacted and invited to collate images or photographs that were representative of their experience of suicidal feelings, although this was not a requirement. Four participants discussed these images during the walk and talk interview, and walked with me to locations on their farm that represented those images such as an isolated tree, barns or hilltops where they could see the clouds rolling in. Participants were asked to describe the meaning of these images and their association to their suicidal feelings.

Data analysis

Each transcript was analysed in turn. I followed the procedure outlined by Larkin and Thompson (2012). I started by making initial notes for each transcript, which recorded my

immediate reflections and observations. From these initial notes, emergent themes were developed within each transcript, and super-ordinate themes were developed for each participant by clustering together similar themes. A summary was then developed for each super-ordinate theme using a thematic map that demonstrated this process and described the experience of each participant. Each super-ordinate theme was then compared with other super-ordinate themes within and across all interviews and connected to those with similar thematic meanings. These themes were developed into a set of overall super-ordinate themes to capture the experiences of the entire sample. The themes were labelled with titles that reflect the experience expressed. The quality and coherence of the themes were reviewed by my supervisors to ensure the robustness of the analysis. An example of how the themes were developed has been provided in appendix 9.

Ethical considerations

It is a commonly held assumption that talking about suicide increases the risk of suicide (Dazzi, Gribble, Wessely, & Fear, 2014). However, according to Chehil and Kutcher's (2012) suicide risk management manual, discussing past suicidal feelings and thoughts will not lead to a suicide attempt. All participants were screened for any suicide risk during an initial telephone conversation prior to their recruitment and were asked for a brief history of their mental health. During this telephone conversation, a screening tool was used to assess risk. This tool enabled me to determine whether there was any current risk of suicide prior to the interview as well as to ascertain GP contact details so that I could contact GPs and notify them of any risk disclosed by participants. All participants self-reported that they were not currently at risk of suicide at the time of the interview.

Results

In the following section, an overview is provided of each super-ordinate theme identified in the analysis, accompanied by a critical discussion and interpretation of the meanings expressed by participants. The salient features of the participants' narrative accounts are presented in this part. Unique aspects of participants' personal experiences, as well as any commonalities, are highlighted. I have included quotations from each participant's interview transcript to illustrate the analytic narrative. Each participant described varied experiences. However, some provided richer narratives and spoke more fully about specific experiences, meaning that in some sections, I draw more heavily on certain participants' responses than others. A wider discussion of the results in relation to existing literature has been provided in the discussion section as encouraged by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

Four super-ordinate themes have been identified: *'It's not macho to talk about your feelings'*, *'My struggle to adapt to the changes in farming'*, *'My suicide was rational'* and *'Feeling suicidal helped me to change my life'*. Each of these encompasses several subthemes. The super-ordinate themes and subthemes are summarised in Figure 1, below. Intersecting all of these themes is the participants' experience of farming in the South West of England and how their rural locality influenced their experience of suicidal and depressive feelings.

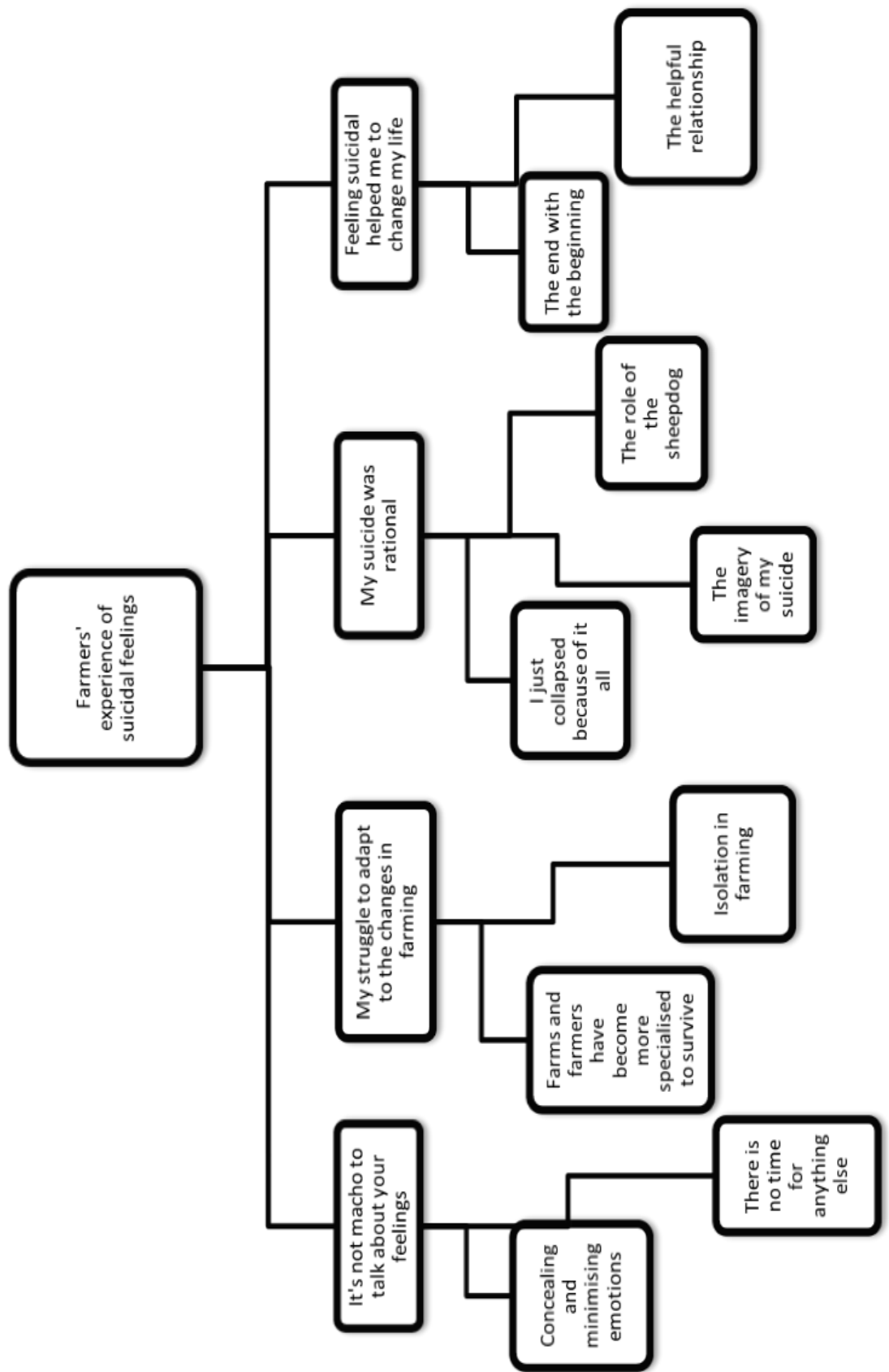


Figure 1. Super-ordinate themes and subthemes flowchart

Super-ordinate theme 1: 'It's not macho to talk about your feelings'

A major theme among participants was that, as farmers, they experienced a culture of masculine expectations. All participants perceived themselves as needing to embody a strong masculine identity which prohibited them from talking about their suicidal feelings with other farmers and even with friends and families. In particular, participants experienced conflict between the need to talk about their emotions and the need to remain 'macho'. This theme encompasses two subthemes: 'concealing and minimising emotions' and 'there is no time for anything else'.

Subtheme 1.1: Concealing and minimising emotions

All participants described concealing their suicidal feelings and their distress from others. The ways in which participants rationalised their choices to not speak about feeling suicidal with their friends or family were interesting. All participants perceived that talking about their feelings was not 'macho'. Bez identified traditional masculinity as a barrier to speaking about his distress:

"Farming is very much a macho culture of just don't talk about those things and it wouldn't even have entered my psyche to think about it or have a conversation like that with anyone"
(Bez).

To Bez, the macho culture in farming does not allow farmers to talk about their emotions. Bez had internalised this message of 'just don't talk about those things' and suggests that to remain macho he needed to conceal how he felt from people within the farming community. The phrase 'it wouldn't even have entered my psyche' to talk about his suicidal feelings further alludes to the unacceptability that Bez felt as a male farmer in disclosing

distress to others and acknowledging it within himself. Furthermore, Bez's internalisation of this macho culture of farming meant that he did not question whether concealment was helpful or unhelpful to his mental health.

Overall, participants described a need to conceal their emotions to protect themselves and their identities as farmers from the judgement of others. They felt that disclosing their emotions would evoke feelings of shame, weakness and inadequacy. Thus, 'concealing and minimising emotions' described participants' sense that it was necessary to hide their feelings and/or minimise their impact on others to protect their sense of self and masculine identity. For instance, Bez felt that expressing his suicidal feelings to other farmers would result in a loss of reputation and judgement from the farming community:

"There is also this sense of a sign of weakness at times with farming if you, you know, sort of there is that strong culture of just get on with it you know 'cos you are a farmer. You are just sort of expected to work hard and get on with it and manage and yeah. So any sign of weakness yeah was pretty much frowned upon really" (Bez).

This extract demonstrates how 'getting on with' the hard work of farming was seen in the wider farming culture as a way of dealing with difficult emotions while having or expressing feelings equated to weakness and arguably a lack of masculinity. In the phrase 'cos you are farmer', Bez articulated the taken-for-granted cultural expectations that farmers need to remain strong, conceal their emotions and get on with farm work. Furthermore, Bez's extract indicated that stopping work and dealing with emotions differently would be unacceptable to farmers and 'frowned upon' by the wider farming community. There were considerable risks attached to expressing emotions for Bez, which included threats to his

identity as a farmer and an appropriately masculine man as well as the potential loss of reputation.

John also raised the threat to reputation, recognising that minimising his problems and not sharing them with other farmers protected him from gossip and stigma. John, who had 'come out' as gay after ending a long heterosexual marriage, described feeling that any gossip about his sexuality could negatively affect his professional identity as a specialist livestock farmer. Consequently, he feared a loss of reputation and worth as a respectable farmer and breeder:

"There is a lot of secrecy in farming as in you mustn't tell the next farmer what you know that thing about the the next farmer's and err another farmer's worst enemy because they have got something you want. There is an awful lot of gossip in farming you know 'what he is doing and you what they are doing' and 'you have heard that story haven't you' and that can be very damaging to to to families and farmers and that makes them very vulnerable... They will use it against you in some way or put you down for it" (John).

For John, the culture of secrecy alongside 'an awful lot of gossip' within farming created a sense of vulnerability that information about you could be used against you. Moreover, this prevented any communication of emotional difficulty given the threat of reputational loss. John's phrase that the next-door farmer is a 'farmer's worst enemy' captures John's experience of the farming culture as farmers set against each other rather than supporting one another. Alongside a macho farming culture, this created a toxic environment in which mental health problems were experienced exacerbated by the participants' need to conceal emotional problems.

Conversely, Gunner expressed shame around his suicidal feelings. He believed that concealing his emotions protected his family from his unhappiness:

"I felt like I had committed a murder ((pauses four seconds)) and I tell you what that used to frighten me... the only person that people saw suffer was myself, I never hit nobody I never told anybody to get out of this kitchen you know I tried to put the best out... I wouldn't speak to people you know" (Gunner).

Gunner used evocative language ('committed a murder' and 'suffer') to describe his experience of suicidal feelings. These phrases indicate he felt like he'd done something very wrong by having these feelings and was living a lie. On the other hand, he felt a sense of pride in hiding his suffering and not taking it out on anyone – 'I never hit nobody I never told anybody to get out'. He not only concealed his suffering but also 'tried to put the best out' and show people he was coping even when he was not. This practice of concealment seems to have allowed Gunner to recoup a sense of masculinity through protecting others.

The lack of understanding about and negative opinions of mental health challenges in the farming community had influenced all participants' decisions to conceal and minimise their feelings from other farmers. In the following extract, Bez describes suffering from depression and suicidal feelings in his early twenties, when there was little understanding of mental health in the farming community:

"I didn't even recognise it as an illness, I just felt that you know it just one of those that everyone feels the same so you know I just think you know well I had nothing to compare. Never talked about it, you know never ever talked about, not on the media or anything like

that so there was just ignorance so you just woke up feeling absolutely really unhappy really sad and just and that's just the way it is and you have to go on" (Bez).

There are two points of interest in Bez's extract: firstly, his perception of a lack of dialogue about mental health in the farming community, and secondly, the lack of understanding Bez felt he and others had about mental health at the time. This created a context in which Bez was unable to talk about his feelings to anyone as he felt that he would not be understood. Furthermore, this context meant that Bez was not able to recognise his feelings as indicative of mental health problems. Instead, he normalised and minimised his feelings as 'just one of those' things and something 'everyone feels'. Feeling 'really sad' was just life and he had no choice but 'to go on'. This created a toxic environment in which seeking help was an impossibility.

Some participants considered speaking to others about their feelings. Jake described feelings of shame the first time he spoke to his mother about his suicidal feelings and depression. Elsewhere in Jake's interview, he described his mother as disinterested in farming and therefore presumably somewhat removed from its toxic culture. Jake also spoke of feeling discomfort about speaking about his mental health with his father, who was a full-time farmer:

"Really when I had to was when mum sits you down and forces you to talk about it really that you do talk about it so yeah it is definitely hard to talk... not a typically masculine thing to talk about your feelings and all that, it is very difficult" (Jake).

Jake's experience conveys the feelings farmers may experience when disclosing their mental health problems. Masculinity is highlighted as an important context that prohibits emotional

expression and evokes feelings of shame. Furthermore, Jake's disclosure of suicidal feelings happened when he felt forced into talking by his mother. Jake's use of pronouns in his comment 'when mum sits you down' evokes interpretation that Jake felt his problems were serious and his mother was concerned. This suggests that to discuss his feelings of suicide the issue needed to be forced by someone who genuinely cared. Furthermore, Jake had described his mother as non-farming, thus perhaps disclosure of his feelings to other family farming members or farming peers who were invested in the farming culture, and thus likely to share beliefs about emotional suppression and masculinity, would have been even more shaming.

Participants' rationale for emotional concealment, minimising and suppression stems from their experience of farming as a masculine culture. Earlier, Bez referred to farming as having a 'get on with it and manage' culture when it comes to emotions. This 'carry on' motto meant that farmers concealed emotions rather than appearing less masculine, which made help-seeking impossible. Concealment also applied to the topic of physical and mental exhaustion from their work on the farm.

"Yeah yes they're tough, they don't talk about feelings, they don't talk about emotions, they don't. They work hard, they work bloody hard and it is physical work and they are out in the elements all the time so you have got to be tough you know, physically and mentally and that is what I have found the hardest to be fair, I can cope with the physical work no problem but it is mentally draining and the work just doesn't stop, it never stops, you get to a busy period and you finish the busy period and can't stop 'cos there are a million and one jobs still to do" (Jake).

“But a lot of farmers don’t talk and they are old school old farmers they certainly wouldn’t want to speak to a woman no a lot of the old school farmers are traditional and men’s men” (Dan).

“And there needs to be more openness and more people prepared to talk and prepared to help in whatever the situations are... there are some in farming communities like any communities that erm look at it like it [depression and suicide] is a weakness in a particular person and don’t necessarily see the full picture they are blinkered” (Jess).

Participants described how traditional views of masculinity in farming had blinded them to their own and other farmers’ emotional needs, whilst internalising messages that suppression was deemed an effective coping strategy and reifying the cultural expectation of ‘toughness’ and ‘resilience’ to keep working. Furthermore, Jess articulated that the usefulness of emotional expression is not understood in farming, preventing farmers from perceiving any benefit in speaking about their mental health.

Subtheme 1.2: There is no time for anything else

The second subtheme was ‘there is no time for anything else’, which captures participants’ experiences of farming as an all-encompassing occupation or way of life, with clear implications for the men’s identities – they were farmers, rather than men who worked in the farming industry. This identity stayed with them even when they were not working, not least because they all lived on their farms. For five of the farmers, the development of a ‘macho’ farmer identity began in childhood while growing up on their family farm. These participants experienced expectations from their families that they would become farmers and, in some instances, inherit their family farms. These expectations meant that participants did not enjoy opportunities accessible to those outside of farming, such as

playing sports regularly. Furthermore, participants described a loss of former hobbies when they became farmers and talked about how having their lives revolve entirely around farming formed part of their 'macho' farmer identity. This context uniquely influenced their experiences of depression and suicidal feelings.

All participants except for Dan were part of a farming family and had, since childhood, developed an identity as a farmer and as a member of the farming community. They learnt that farmers talk about farming, and nothing else:

"We would see them [neighbouring farmers] and chat or they were driving a tractor, it would all be farming related, the price of cattle or the price of milk or you know or it will be all be very much farming related conversations, pleasant conversation you know all that sort of stuff" (Bez).

"And it is the sort of thing where what is going on in the rest of the world can be a million miles away... that is irrelevant to what is happening to the farmers" (Jess).

"We [Gunner and his parents] rarely ever came in here [lounge] only watched the same news weather and plan the next day's work not "what about going to young farmers?" everything evolved around the farm and I just accepted it Rochelle because I called it the 'gospel onto work' if you see what I am saying like a gospel. Erm and I knew nothing different and I just had to abide by it" (Gunner).

In the above quotes, the participants' highlighted their earliest experiences of farming ('pleasant conversations' about the price of milk), reminisced about the times in their lives when they were completely absorbed in farming ('world can be a million miles away') and stated that farming was the only topic that could be talked about with other farmers and

their families. Farming was immersive and participants rarely considered what was happening off the farm. The world beyond farming felt remote and removed from their lives, vividly expressed by Jess as ‘a million miles away’. The focus on farming was framed as normal by Bez – his phrase ‘you know all that sort of stuff’ implied the interviewer shared enough knowledge of farming to know the standard topics farmers discuss. For Gunner, ‘abiding’ by his parents’ authority further demonstrated Gunner’s lack of agency to challenge the way things are done in farming and demonstrated that his only choice was to accept farming as his life’s focus. This was further demonstrated in Gunner’s phrase ‘gospel onto work’, suggesting that everything revolving around farming at the time was experienced as correct when he was younger and lacked agency but as an adult he felt this was not how he wanted his farming experience to be.

Participants perceived a lack of freedom to balance their life and work with pleasurable activities. For example, Gunner felt as though he had no choice but to become a farmer, meaning he lacked control over his destiny whilst he worked with his parents. Thus, recognising the need for balance was something he achieved after many years of farming. He alludes to a deeper problem facing the emotional consequences of having always prioritised his family’s farm over his emotional wellbeing:

“Work was sort of what I had for breakfast dinner and tea if you see what I am saying. Yes that was the priority I didn’t have no choice at the time but I am still glad that I took that route but erm perhaps it has told its tale as life has gone on but erm certainly as I getting older I have started to need to get the balance between work and play” (Gunner).

Here, Gunner described having no regrets while also recognising the costs of prioritising farming to the exclusion of everything else – he frames the need for balance as something

associated with growing older. This allowed him to retain a sense of his younger self having made the right choices ('glad that I took route') while at the same time he was aware that he had no choice ('I didn't have no choice'). In this comment, Gunner articulates how he justifies the struggle he had with the lack of choice and suffering as a farmer with the knowledge that he has now about the need to re-balance his priorities.

Pursuing a career in farming was an expectation rather than a choice for these men. This influenced their decisions to disengage with hobbies they had previously enjoyed. The pressure to focus all of his energies on farming was particularly intense for Gunner, who was the only son in his family:

"I was her [his mother's] only son and people say only sons get spoilt but I don't think so I have seen other children get spoilt more than I have. I think for farmers that only having one then you get all the responsibility and you can take too much. I thought I better stay home rather than playing sport, I don't like I didn't like rebelling I still don't like it now, I don't think, some people now said to me now 'I don't know how you stuck it' but there you are, you stick at it because well it is worth it now" (Gunner).

Gunner's passive framing is striking here and conveys his lack of choice and agency – 'you get all the responsibility'. His choice was in how much responsibility to take. There was a risk of taking 'too much' – accepting too much pressure and the full weight of expectation. Deciding not to play sport was a way for Gunner to demonstrate his commitment to the farm and please his parents by accepting the responsibility they gave to him. Furthermore, Gunner's comment 'I didn't like rebelling' alludes to an internal concern he had that to refuse to prioritise the farm would come at a personal cost to him and would not have been the normal expectations of farming culture where farmers prioritise farming over interests.

For Bez and Jake, accepting their inheritance came at a cost and with a sense of loss not always felt at the time:

“It is like the price I played on coming over to the farm, I was always going to come over on the farm, that was never in any doubt for me when I was at school but the price I paid was that you wouldn’t be playing any cricket or football it would not even enter your psyche”

(Bez).

In the following quote, Jake explains the invitation he had from his brother to go on holiday abroad with him and friends, to help lift his mood:

“He [brother] said all you got to do Jake is pay for your flight and come out, and me and two of my brothers were going to go and obviously I couldn’t go because I was calving” (Jake).

In both cases, the participants used language such as ‘never in any doubt’ and ‘obviously’ to convey the implicit expectation they experienced to prioritise family farming duties when other possibilities were on offer. Moreover, the culture of working long hours, their dedication to the family farm and the loss of personal interests became normalised as part of the cultural expectation that farmers farm and have no time for anything else.

This imbalance was something the participants reported their parents had experienced too – these stories were told to demonstrate the normality of life focused solely on farming:

“My dad loved sport and he was a lot better footballer than I was in his day and good cricketer and there again I think there again he was the only son so when he came back on the farm that all went... I mean hobbies were hard to do and commit to and he lost out on doing what he enjoyed at the time” (Bez).

Bez rationalises giving up hobbies given the lack of time available outside of the farming routine. He illustrated the difficulties some farmers experience when trying to justify time away from farming for other hobbies given the lack of both time available and precedence of other farmers being able to balance farming and hobbies. Bez's sense-making of his dad not playing sport was rationalised in relation to an expectation that he was going to return to farming and give up sport despite being a talented sportsman. His phrase 'he was a lot better footballer than I was' implies that Bez was less entitled to play sports when those who were more talented did not get the chance to play. This was also echoed in Gunner's experience:

"I was in a bubble if you know what I mean. I wanted to burst it [and play sports], well I, no I didn't want to burst it because erm this is my home and I thought no I didn't want to rebel you know. But as it has gone on and I see it sort of being clearer the older I have got because I have gone and got a bit further in life and saw what life other people have lived and the things they did that I didn't do. I said to ours is "look you work hard [school work and farming] you play hard" and my two boys play football and they have played ever since they were sixteen and before, they have done very well and they can't understand why I didn't" (Gunner).

For Gunner, there is an internal conflict around wanting to play sport and live up to his parents' expectations of him as a farmer. Gunner's conceptualises playing sport as rebelling against these expectations, and although he wanted to 'burst it' and play sport, he feared the consequences in his home life. Gunner recognised that his sons' lives, including playing sport, are different from his. He felt he has been able to teach them the balance between work-life and hobbies, which he was not taught.

Giving up hobbies and adhering to farming expectations was conceived as a sign of the participants' masculine identities that demonstrated them as hardworking, dedicated to farming and negating their needs:

"So I was born in that [hardworking farming background] and that way of think really so yeah yeah but also and also stupid pride thing again as well and sometimes you think you get a bit of a rush thinking look at them they're going off to the pub [after the football game] but I've got to go and work, aren't I the better one and all that rubbish" (Bez).

Bez's comments show how he found a way of making sense of the loss of hobbies as a positive feature of a farmer's masculine identity ('a bit of a rush'). This dedication to work gave Bez a sense of superiority over other men, something he now reframes as 'stupid pride'.

In summary, the super-ordinate theme 'It's not macho to talk about your feelings' captures the complex interactional picture of expectation from the farming community as well as cultural and personal masculinity and the management of difficult emotions. In particular, the personal shame caused by failing to meet these expectations was experienced by all participants and influenced their mental health.

Super-ordinate theme 2: 'My struggle to adapt to the changes in farming'

Farming is a rapidly evolving industry. In recent years, farms have become larger, more industrialised businesses, while the industry has moved away from smaller, family-owned farms into larger partnership enterprises. This superordinate theme captures the men's stories about the pleasures of farming that have been lost due to the mechanisation of

farming practices. This superordinate theme encompasses two subthemes: *'Farms and farmers have become more specialised to survive'* and *'Isolation in farming'*.

Subtheme 2.1: Farms and farmers have had to become more specialised to survive

An important feature of the participants' experience of farming in the Southwest of England was the mechanical changes in farming that contributed to their increased isolation from other farmers and farming families, which in turn contributed to their suicidal feelings. In the following extract, Bez reminisced about times before the use of machinery was commonplace, when harvesting by hand resulted in contact with people he would not otherwise see. He recalled these times with fondness and highlighted the importance of socialising with people whilst working. These experiences offered him different experiences and a connection with the outside world:

Bez: *"So when we farmed this area and all these fields here about hundred and twenty hundred and fifty acres when we first started it off and it was all sort of hay, making hay back in the day small bales so erm dad would have some people he knew sort of and they would come out and they'd be working and come out in the evening to carry the hay carry the straw and I just use to really enjoy those hours because they were obviously had no connections to farming and always had lots of different stories and that was always really great laugh and we were only kids at the time"*.

Rochelle: *"So they weren't necessarily farmers, they were just friends?"*.

Bez: *"No they had no connection to farming, they weren't farmers, one was a mechanic, one was a builder, one was an electrician just people my dad and mum had known over the years in town and he would pay them a bit of cash and they would come out and help. And that*

was a classic thing mum would bring the tea out onto the hayfield and we would all sit down and have tea, we have pictures of all of that and obviously as things become more mechanised small bales turned into big bales and then all of that got stopped”.

The experience here is of loss of a way of life (“that was always really great laugh and we were only kids at the time”) which Bez perceived as being more protective of mental health. There is a contrast between the romantic image of family farming (working in the hayfield was worthy of recording through photographs) and the isolation of mechanised farming. They (Bez and his family) were both literally creating hay bales and metaphorically ‘making hay’ during a halcyon period in farming history.

The changes in farming were experienced as problematic for participants’ mental health. The mechanisation of Bez’s family farm meant working more with his family and seeing less of other farmers, which negatively impacted his mental health:

“You’ll working just in each other’s pockets pretty much of all the time seven days a week. It was like an enmeshed feeling it was slightly claustrophobic in some ways because the ironic thing is as the farm got bigger and the machinery and the technology improved you become more self-sufficient so you can sort of cope with most of the work ourselves, the three of us, so we didn’t need to employ a lot of people” (Bez).

Central to Bez’s experience was the ‘irony’ of being more self-sufficient farmers and needing fewer labourers, and therefore becoming more isolated. Furthermore, Bez’s sense-making of the loss of occasional farm labourers meant his family became more ‘enmeshed’ with each other. The use of ‘in each other’s pockets’ and ‘claustrophobic’ (although this is

mitigated by 'slightly') convey a sense of isolation from the outside world and of having no space to breathe; Bez felt trapped.

Participants perceived that isolation in farming was caused by changes to how farmers categorise their work, now seeing themselves as specialists in specific areas of farming. Jess, considered a specialist in animal husbandry, felt that his specialism left him more isolated from other farmers as he was considered competent to work alone:

"I am basically left in charge in the lambing shed erm and then a few hours later I will see somebody and they'll be saying "right which ones have we got ready to move out which ones can we put outside?" I have spent a lot of time doing farm work when the animals have been very close but the people have been quite distant" (Jess).

Jess described his isolation as a matter of distance from other people and, as a consequence, stated that he felt closer to the animals than people. Furthermore, in the following extract, Jess described how changes in farming meant he became more isolated from other farmers due to the demand for his specialism:

"When I started out in agriculture it was far more general work just sort of general routine work whereas now whereas now I have got skills working with livestock and I have got certain farmers that basically that I work for that will give me a phone call and tell me that they want sheep vaccinated or they want particular bolus put into sheep or so on and I'll arrive and they will give me the relevant equipment they've got and very often I am taking my own equipment and I carry on and do the job" (Jess).

Jess is now a livestock specialist working for various farmers and employed to complete specific tasks. This means he often works alone, not needing help from other farmers. On

the one hand, working alone boosts Jess's self-efficacy as a specialist, whilst on the other hand, this means he has become isolated from less-skilled farm labourers and/or work that requires more than one farmer and so offered connection with others.

Participants needed to stay abreast of new skills and machinery to keep up with the changes in farming and the demands of the food industry. Consequently, their relationship to livestock had changed – what were once considered beloved farm animals or even pets have become commodities and a source of profit. Participants experienced a sense of loss around changes to the craft of farming, with family-run businesses morphing into larger concerns:

“We are in a world where farming is becoming less and less to do with what our grandparents and great grandparents did and more to do with the high flown businessmen who own factories and those kinds of business that those people are involved in and it just happens to be that involves animals but actually the connection with animals is becoming less and less and actually they are just a commodity” (John).

John reported a disconnect between his grandparents' experiences of farming and his own, with farming now indistinguishable from other types of businesses and “high flown businessmen who own factories”, which conjures up images of men in suits and leather chairs rather than men in wellies and overalls. This account conveys a sense of loss: a loss of connection with previous generations as well as a loss of relationships with family and animals. There is a contrast here between a romantic image of family farming and the cold, calculated world of business.

Subtheme 2.2: Isolation in farming

Participants described the impact of isolation in farming as contributing to their mental health deteriorating. All participants' farming duties created periods of loneliness in which they had more time alone with their feelings of unhappiness:

"I hate being on my own and that is when it really hit me yeah and that is the worst thing is when I am on my own and I start to think yeah I can see how the time can be and yeah when it is in your mind and it spirals on to something" (Dan).

"You're left alone with your own thoughts [about suicide] and it is horrible. Your own thoughts are dangerous and sometimes you shake your head and the thought just leaves ((pause 3 seconds)) and sometimes it doesn't" (Jake).

Vividly illustrated in these three extracts are the risks and dangers of isolation and being alone with their thoughts as well as the potential for thoughts to 'spiral' to dark places. For Jake, the isolation made it harder to dismiss suicidal thoughts.

The rural location as well as the landscape of the farms belonging to four participants (Bez, Jess, Gunner and Jake) were influential in their perception of distance from others and their feelings of loneliness. Bez describes the thoughts and feelings he experienced when he was alone, which were intensified by the rural locality of his farm and its dramatic landscape:

"You feel really insignificant and so on the one hand I use to like it [being alone] because I loved the coast and on the hand it use to sort of it was probably not the best thing to make me feel increase my feelings of insignificant and no one would miss me if I wasn't around" (Bez).

In the vast landscape of his farm and the surrounding coast, Bez felt insignificant and dislocated from others. The landscape that used to be loved now became a threat to Bez's wellbeing. To help me understand his experience of insignificance in the context of his farm's landscape, Bez walked me to a location from which the imposing landscape and size of the farm could be observed. There was a sense that Bez felt there was a grander scheme to things, which he did not feel part of due to his feeling of insignificance. These thoughts contributed to a negative perception of his worth to the world. Therefore, the landscape was an important component of Bez's experience of isolation and suicidality whilst farming.

There was a sense that social media increased the sense of isolation and disconnection from other farmers and friends. Jake, the youngest of the farmers, felt that while social media platforms offered a connection to others, they nonetheless increased his feelings of isolation as everyone appeared to be having fun while he was working hard on the farm:

"Just cos you're on Snapchat doesn't mean you've got... it doesn't mean that you are less isolated 'cos you can see everyone else having fun if anything you feel more isolated" (Jake).

Jake found that engaging with social media didn't equate to a meaningful connection with others. Images of others having fun increased his sense of isolation and disconnection.

At the same time as recognising the problems of social isolation, all participants described seeking isolation to have time to think about their suicidal feelings. This was captured in Bez's description of isolation as a place of both solace and unhappiness:

"There was real conflict really between solace and and worthlessness but that was literally was it, was sort of classic thing sort of come up here a bit earlier and sort of sit by a sheltered hedges, find a bit of shelter from the wind, and it was sort of nice on a day like

today get a bit of sun, yeah and just sort of contemplate things for a period of time yeah just buy erm I think just buy a bit of me time really yeah” (Bez).

Whilst discussing this experience, Bez and I were stood in a field at the highest point on his old farm, sheltering from the January winds coming off the sea. His choice of words ‘sheltering from the wind’ describes the physical effort to avoid the weather in the exposed landscape of his farm whilst also conveying his own attempts to shelter from the emotional conditions of farming at the time. Bez’s sense of ‘me time’ can be seen as both positive to his mental wellbeing and opportunity to ‘contemplate things’ that overwhelmed him. Thus, isolation for Bez was understood to be both a positive and negative experience.

Isolation allowed the participants’ time to think about their feelings away from the responsibilities and distractions of the farm and their families. For Jess, speaking with his family about his depression did not seem possible, meaning seeking time alone was precipitated by factors that felt overwhelming. In the following extract, isolation contributed to Jess contemplating suicide:

“As a result of losing all the livestock in May and erm one evening there I literally I thought I gotta I gotta get some of this sorted out and I literally thought I’m gunna to have to go for a walk. I was basically looking at my situation and contemplating what had happened and what is happening in the future and everything was very clear to me at that point I basically start weighing up these sort of things and I thought I need to get some clarity on all of this and do I really want to carry on with all of this? Do I want to live with this? Do I want to struggle on? Or is there a way out? And it became clear that there was a way out, there was a way in which the the the suffering the anxiety the stress and everything could be ended and I thought I could end it [suicide]” (Jess).

Jess's phrase 'everything was clear to me at that point' refers to how Jess used the time alone to consider his entire situation and afforded him space to think about suicide. Time alone and isolation from others was initially felt to be positive for coping but had contributed to feelings of suicide. Both Bez and Jess used the isolation in their roles as farmers to make time to reflect on their feelings. They describe this isolation as easy to achieve in farming, given their many one-man duties and the farms' rural localities. Therefore, isolation was considered a consequence of both the mechanic changes in farming and their rural locations, whilst also being sought-after by farmers as a time to contemplate their feelings.

In summary, the super-ordinate theme '*my struggle to adapt to the changes in farming*' captures the participants' experience of farming as an evolving industry which has lost its connection to values of traditional farming methods and animal husbandry. Participants expressed the loss of social connection that once made farming enjoyable as well as the unfavourable outcome of isolation on farmers' mental health.

Super-ordinate theme 3: 'My suicide was rational'

The third super-ordinate theme identified the men's conceptualisation of their suicidal feelings as rational. All participants except one (Gunner) experienced their suicidal feelings as a rational response and saw suicide as a rational choice, both at the time of those feelings and during the interview. In the theme '*my suicide was rational*', some of the complex phenomenological experiences of sensations and feelings at the time participants were considering suicide were captured as well as how participants made sense of these experience then and now in relation to their role as a farmer.

This super-ordinate theme consists of three subthemes: *'I just collapsed because of it all'*, *'The imagery of my suicide'* and *'The role of the sheepdog'*.

Subtheme 3.1: I just collapsed because of it all

The circumstances leading up to participants' decisions to suicide varied. However, a common feature for all participants was their experience of a prolonged period of stress related to unexpected farming events. In particular, participants experienced feelings of hopelessness and a sense of failure which were integral to their decision regarding suicide. This decision was also influenced by their inability to cope with their situations while questioning their role as head of the household and their capability as a farmer.

Foot-and-mouth culling had begun on Jess's farm between 2001-2002, during which time he experienced physical and mental overload:

"I literally said to them [army officials on-site to manage the culling] I am breaking up and I just can't take any more of this, I am breaking up and I finished these phone calls. We were literally at a point then we had to wait then to get the various authorities and powers that be to get their relevant people in the relevant places to continue with the culling and I just sort of broke up and I said I am breaking up and I cannot take any more of this I am just going to kill myself... if I had been in the situation there where I had a shotgun with me I would have put the shotgun to my head and blasted my head off. It sounds extreme but that was the extreme of the situation, I just literally at the point where I just literally couldn't take any more of it" (Jess).

Jess's use of the words 'breaking up' suggests both loss of phone signal and his struggle to cope under extreme pressure. 'Breaking up' is evocative of a physical ending of the self; Jess

could not cope with the reality of what was happening to his animals and his identity, which was evoked by the culling of his entire livestock.

For Jess, the decision to kill himself was a solution to escape this extreme situation (“It sounds extreme but that was the extreme of the situation”). The powerlessness Jess felt waiting for authority figures to recommence the culling was agonising, thus his decision to carry out suicide could be considered as his attempt to regain a sense of control of the situation and his emotions.

Feelings of hopelessness and struggling to cope with the pressure and demands of farming were also experienced by other participants. For example, Bez described feeling hopeless and reaching rock bottom whilst in hospital following his first suicide attempt:

“And so they sectioned me, so I could remember and I didn’t take my meds from that point onwards so I remember being on the ward and er being on the bed and having a plastic bag with a few bits and pieces in it, and I thought well I have lost my job, and I have lost my career erm and they wouldn’t let me go out and see my family my children, I have got this plastic bag, I have lost my liberty now, so I thought well I have got nothing else to lose now and well this is as low as I can go” (Bez).

The sense of loss in this passage is overwhelming – Bez described losing everything that gave his life meaning and shaped his sense of self and identity, emphasised by the fact that he had nothing left other than a plastic bag ‘with a few bits and pieces in it’, which he later referred to as just the plastic bag itself, an impersonal object, which is empty of meaning and identity. Bez had also lost control of his life, his freedom and his autonomy. In this context, suicide was framed as a rational response to a lack of meaning.

The theme *'I just collapsed because of it all'* highlights that all participants felt their suicide offered a means of escape and/or rest from the extreme, overwhelming stress they were experiencing. Jake began to think about suicide during a difficult lambing season, in which he had become exhausted by the long hours, difficult weather conditions and conflict with family members. His feelings about suicide were associated with wanting to end the unrelenting demands of farming:

Jake: *"Yeah it just offered an end to er an end, it is a difficult question"*

Rochelle: *"What did an end feel like to you at that time?"*

Jake: *"A rest, rest (sighs) time off (laughs)..."*

Jake wanted an escape. Jake conceptualised suicide as a 'rest' from his reality, suggesting that Jake felt that in his reality, rest was not possible. He sighed when he said rest, capturing the relentless workload farmers have, which offers little opportunity to stop and rest. Jake suggested that time off is something he should have had from farming. However, he laughed at this notion, demonstrating that he believed this to be a fanciful, foolish idea which was not aligned with the reality of farming.

Suicide also represented an opportunity for Bez to escape the overwhelming pressures in his life at the time:

"I couldn't really er think because my mind at that time was just like completely overloaded and erm cos I had so much going on erm so busy it all just becomes too much and erm physically tired and mentally all just too much and it all just. I couldn't think about things and there was this complete sense of feeling overwhelmed by stuff so I just knew that I wanted to escape so I guess in answer to that question those periods when I would just pull

into a lay-by and have those times would be the times when I allow myself to have those thoughts about the bag [bag was the method of suffocation and suicide], looking back I thought I was doing myself a favour by giving myself a break you know I will just have a bit of a break and just gather my thoughts but I couldn't because there was just so much going on and then I would end up sort of feeling even more worthless" (Bez).

Becoming overwhelmed by farming duties was evocatively described by Bez in his use of words such as 'overloaded', 'too much' and 'so much going on'. Bez's only way of coping was to take a short break to 'gather his thoughts', but this proved toxic as it only served to increase his feelings of worthlessness. In this context, time to himself was time to escape his real-life stressors and 'allow' himself time to think about suicide as an escape.

What both of these cases (Jake and Bez) share is a conceptualisation of suicide as a means of escape from the unrelenting pressure of farming and the expectation that they will cope with this pressure.

Equally, suicide was considered a method of communicating participants' unhappiness about the stress they had been under to other people, as John points out in the following quote. Here John describes how he felt his landlord's behaviour towards him was intentional to get John off the farm and how this happened (suicide or leaving the farm) was irrelevant:

"Oh definitely our landlord he is really really erm a thoughtless person well much more than just a thoughtless person he is mercenary and greedy and has no respect for anybody. I think he wants to take the farm off me and secretly rub his hands and say 'that was one way of getting rid of him wasn't it' and he wouldn't give a damn and it would be a shame on him

because if I ever go like that then I wouldn't go lightly I would go with a damn good letter and for everyone to see... the letter is definitely something I would do and strong words to put in there and a lot to do with him because he has made my life difficult and it is the struggle against all adversity" (John).

For John, a tenant farmer, suicide represented a way of communicating his feelings to his landlord, whom he felt had contributed to his unhappiness. John described his landlord as thoughtless and then even more strongly as mercenary and greedy, creating an image of an unfeeling businessman who victimised John, whose revenge would be to publicly shame his landlord by exposing him to the wider farming community. It's interesting that John can't imagine confronting his landlord in life, only in death. This is a passive confrontation, one that underscores John's sense of hopelessness; John is overwhelmed by external forces and has little in the way of agency other than choosing suicide.

A further theme identified from participants' interviews was their experience of failing to fulfil their parents' expectations by carrying on the patriarchal lineage of farming and becoming the farmer their family wanted them to be. For example, when Jake was an aspiring young farmer, criticism about his farming skills from his grandfather created feelings of hopelessness about his future career in farming:

"Granddad said 'oh it breaks my heart seeing the sheep like that, the sheep are too thin you haven't fed the sheep enough' oh that sent me over the edge that did that was a real hard day, that really made it feel like it was my fault" (Jake).

Jake valued the opinions of the older farmers in his family and this criticism impacted on his perceived identity as a capable farmer. This was conveyed by the power of these words to

send Jake 'over the edge', which imply a turning point in his suicidal feelings. Again, there was a lack of agency evident here – the criticism 'made' Jake feel to blame, he had no choice in how he responded to his grandfather's words.

During Jake's interview, we came across a sheep lying dead in one of his fields. It had succumbed to the heat. As we approached the sheep, Jake spoke about his experience of feeling suicidal and how constantly being surrounded by death on his farm had added to his feelings of hopelessness. Jake painted a stark picture of farming as an occupation in which death is a constant, inescapable feature:

Jake: "I mean it is just always something going wrong there is something always the fence is always broke or the cows are laying the sheep are lame something is dying of a disease... And you're constantly seeing death, I know that they say there is livestock and there is deadstock but you're constantly seeing that".

Rochelle: "Could you tell me a bit more about that when you say it really does get to you?"

Jake: "I always thought that the cows look after us financially so it is like my duty to look after them. When you see erm ((pause 3 seconds)) (tearful)... Yeah when you see the deadstock and erm you can't help but think it is your fault especially when like, er say like you go and see a dead calf there and then you got to go and tell your old man 'oh the calf died' and then he says "you should have done this or you should have done that it is your fault" like. We had just come through calving like, I am not an emotional man at all, it is funny really it is only this last year, it is just ((pause 2 seconds)) I think when I first come home farming like, you put your heart and soul into stuff and say something dies and then over the years you become emotionless to it, you kind of care less and less you know what I

mean? You try not to get emotionally attached to them [livestock] because you know that they are not always going to be there like, yeah but it always seems to get to me or whether it is just me or whether everyone is like it.”

Jake described putting his ‘heart and soul’, all of his being, into his livestock. His way of coping with the death of livestock was to (try to) become numb to the emotions of loss.

There is some tension in this extract – Jake understood and positioned himself as ‘not an emotional man at all’, which frames his reaction to death as a personal failure. Emotional numbness is framed as an inevitable and normative consequence of farming animals.

Avoiding becoming too attached to animals is a way of dealing with the reality of livestock farming and inevitability of the death of his animals. However, Jake indicated that he could not quite manage to achieve this detachment from his emotions. He vacillates back and forth between framing his reaction as normative or as unique to him. Jake’s conceptualisation that being emotional due to loss of livestock is that he has failed in his role if other farmers are not like this. The combination of loss of livestock and being too emotional was made sense of as a failure and gave a sense of his hopelessness to cope with the demands that encompass being a farmer.

All participants saw their own suicide attempts as rational. Moreover, two participants (Jess and Jake) felt that suicide was a rational decision for any farmer in a similar situation. In both cases, participants could empathise with, understand and justify the actions of other farmers who had ended their lives by suicide:

“I think if you had a group of people in that situation who had completed their own lives and I think if you analyse them some of them would say yes I made the right decision and some of them would say I made a snap decision and I don’t know if it was the right decision or not

and some would say I made an impulse bad reaction and it was the wrong decision but I am absolutely certain that there would be some who would be content, complete and have a gratification there that they had made the right decision. Because for some people it is the right decision” (Jess).

“I always thought it was a selfish thing to do once you know but now I can see why people do it” (Jake).

Jess and Jake had both attempted suicide in the past and after returning to good mental health felt pleased they had not ended their lives. However, both considered suicide to be a rational or ‘the right’ choice for some farmers to ‘who had completed their own lives’. Jess felt that some farmers’ suicides were the only means of escaping an awful situation like the one he had endured. Jake’s personal experiences led him to re-evaluate suicide and render it more understandable as a response to distress. Although the men here are talking about others, these accounts suggest they are talking to and about themselves (“but I am absolutely certain that there would be some who would be content” and “now I can see why people do it”) and have developed their own understanding that suicides should invite compassion and empathy rather than harsh judgement from the farming community. In Jess’s quote, he made sense of other farmers’ suicides through his own conceptualisation of life after death. He suggested that if research or the research could ‘analyse’ the dead’s choices, some of those who have completed their lives would feel content and would feel they had ‘made the right decision’ to end their lives. Although this analysis would not be possible to achieve in reality, it does consolidate Jess’s position that suicide is a rational and valid choice for himself and other individuals.

Subtheme 3.2: The imagery of my suicide

In this theme, participants' experiences of mental imagery around their imagined suicide and its aftermath are captured, as are other sensory and existential experiences that formed part of participants' experiences of their suicide attempts.

The imagery that participants experienced in association with their suicidal feelings was varied. For some, this imagery was closely related to feelings of depression and suicide as well as the landscape of their farm and weather. For example, Bez walked with me to a location on his old farm that was at the top of hill and close to a cliff edge which overlooked the ocean, where he could see weather systems rolling in. The visual representation of his feelings of depression was a black cloud:

"It is a big black cloud, it is always the big black cloud yeah. So I always described it as this er because you know you get a lot of them up here and you could see them coming up from the left, and you could physically see them and it just you know and when they come over you know and they can literally throw everything into darkness. So yeah it was always a big black cloud. And it would sort of creep up on me and just descend on me yeah so yeah that would be quite regular thing" (Bez).

Bez's use of words such as 'creep up' and 'descends on me' depicts his experience of these feelings as unexpected and unpredictable, much like weather systems. 'Creep' and 'descend' also convey the sense of a being, something monstrous, dark and deathly, that blocks out light. Mental imagery, as well as verbal thoughts, were a frequent feature of Bez's suicidal feelings.

The mental imagery of two of the participants related to the method by which they planned to attempt suicide. Bez imagined holding a bag over his head and suffocating himself. He had learnt about this method from a television programme:

“It was a bag over my head and that was my preferred that was my ‘I am going to do it’. I can remember and I don’t know where it came from either, I was watching something on TV or doing something and I had never thoughts of that and then I saw something about babies suffocating I just thought that is probably going to be the most you know the most painless way of doing it and the least destructive for other people to find and stuff like that so yeah so that yeah was going through my mind at the time.” (Bez).

Bez played forward this scenario in his mind, thinking about how his body would appear to others and the impact on those who would find him after he had completed his suicide. Therefore, his imagery was functional. It helped him plan and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of suffocation.

Equally, Jess articulated strong mental imagery that was associated with suicidal feelings. This imagery focused heavily on the planning of suicide. He planned to ensure his attempt would not be interrupted by choosing the best location. Jess described his flash-forward to his suicide attempt as having focused on the aftermath and making sure the next person to see him was a professional and not a family member. Like Bez, Jess considered the impact discovering his body would have on his family. It felt important that Jess was able to ensure that his suicide and its aftermath went to plan, thus imagery helped him to plan the meticulous positioning of the rope and the right location so that he could imagine the police arriving:

“Yes putting the rope around my neck. Putting the rope basically attaching the rope and basically before erm making sure the rope was attached in the right place erm ringing the police and making sure I got through to somebody in the police who was aware that I was serious and saying to them this is who I am, giving my details saying where I was to and where they would find me. I didn’t want mother or father to find me. I didn’t want somebody from the immediate family to find me, I wanted the police to come. I thought if they come with sirens blazing I thought that is fine I get an indication and I can see the direction of where the roads were to, I thought if I see blue lights or I hear sirens I will know that somebody is on their way” (Jess).

All participants’ descriptions of their imagined suicide took into account the people who were going to find their bodies. They imagined and planned their suicides to protect their families’ feelings and ensure they would not be the ones to find them. This was captured in Jess’s phrasing ‘I thought if I see blue lights or I hear sirens I will know that somebody is on their way’, which is paradoxical as seeing blue lights and sirens of the emergency services usually means help is on its way but here Jess understands this to mean that a professional is coming to manage his remains. The reasons for this were related to a fear of how their bodies might appear as well as the assumption that professionals are best equipped to cope with this situation rather than his family.

For all participants apart from Gunner, suicide-related imagery was thought about regularly leading up to their suicide attempt:

“A lot less scary a whole lot less scary, a lot more frequent and it was just almost like an air of inevitability about it” (Bez).

“It [thinking about suicide] felt like an OCD an obsessive disorder of that going on and on that is how it seemed constantly thinking about it. I had thoughts of going over to the cliffs near where I use to live and jumping off the edge of the cliff” (Dan).

Jake: “I thought about take my seatbelt off and ploughing into something and make it look like an accident, probably the way I would have gone about it. It is a horrible thought someone has got to clean up the mess, there is no way of apologising that someone has got to pick up your body”

Rochelle: “Were you imagining doing it?”

Jake: “Yeah”

Rochelle: “Yeah mmm how often did you think about it back then?”

Jake: “About four or five times a day. The thought of erm just the thought of hanging yourself you know it pops into your head ((pauses 4 seconds)) about four or five times a day I would get these thoughts”.

In the participants’ narratives, they depicted a similar pattern of frequently thinking about and imagining their suicide. The experience of suicidal imagery for Jake as that which ‘pops into your head’ seems to suggest that suicidal thinking was effortless and spontaneous.

Bez’s phrase ‘a whole lot less scary’ indicated a desensitising of suicide from scary to inviting. The ‘obsession’ with imagining their suicide plan provided farmers with a sense that their suicide was plausible – as Bez said, ‘it was just almost like an air of inevitability about it’.

In the following extract from Jess's interview, he addresses the heightened auditory sensitivity he had whilst he was sat in a tree, about to end his own life through hanging:

"It was a calm pleasant sort of evening and it was like my hearing sense had gone super strong super intense my hearing was like clear very clear and I could and these people were actually there and I found out afterwards that they were genuinely there I mean they had no idea what I was doing. Erm and it was quite a long way if they were just talking loudly you wouldn't have heard them but for some reason I could hear them" (Jess).

Jess set the scene for his suicide as 'a calm pleasant sort of evening' and provided a context to what he described earlier as a 'calm rational decision' to carry out suicide. Jess's description also conveys that his suicide decision was also calm, not rushed and this feels paradoxical to the reality of what he was planning to do – hang himself. The intensity of Jess's suicidal feelings also included changes to his auditory senses. Jess suggested that he would not expect to have heard people talking unless his senses had not been hyper-aroused due to planning his suicide.

Jess's hyper-aroused state was unique and not mentioned by the other participants and was conceptualised as a multi-sensory experience of heightened awareness and simultaneous numbing of his senses:

"And another thing I felt at the time was that it was as if my pain sensors had switched off. I did not feel I was experiencing pain. One of the strange things was that when I came to get down from this oak tree where I was sat to, if you are familiar with oak trees you know they sometimes they have sort of hard knobbly nubs on them little bits and there was a little point on there which was quite hard and quite sharp and I was sort of manoeuvring myself off this

branch that I was comfortably sat on thinking I am going to have to get down I stub my bottom on this little sharp piece and I didn't feel any pain I did not feel any pain at all but I did not feel any pain it was as if pain was switched off, I felt that if I had hit my hand with a hammer or cut my hand with er a saw that there would be no pain that was how I felt at that particular time" (Jess).

Jess was the only participant who reported a heightened sensory awareness and a lack of physical sensation and pain. Jess's repetition that 'I did not feel any pain' was striking language to use and conveys a sense that he felt detached from his body at the time. Moreover, 'it was as if pain was switched off' implies that he felt his body was operating mechanically and a fundamental process, 'feeling pain' (both physically and emotionally), that was key to preventing his suicide attempt was not operating properly. This indicates that factors such as emotional and sensory experiences being 'switched off' had contributed to suicide feeling rational at the time.

Subtheme 3.3: The role of the sheepdog

A final subtheme drawn from three participants' narratives was the role of their dogs in preventing their suicides as well as their perceptions of the close bond between farmers and their working dogs.

Most participants perceived their sheepdogs as working animals who, like them, have a purpose and function on the farm – that is, to look after the livestock. Yet three of the farmers perceived their relationships with their sheepdog and/or working dogs as special and different from the relationships they had with the other animals on the farm. Jess captured the nature of this relationship when he described thinking of his dog whilst he was sat in a tree about to end his life:

“And one of the strange things that came to mind was well I would miss my sheepdog (pause 2 seconds). This is absolutely true. I thought to myself I would miss the sheepdog. The sheepdog rather like myself was rather traumatised by all that had happened [foot-and-mouth culling] and the sheepdog will miss me and I thought I will miss that dog, that dog has been good to me and that dog will miss me, and I thought that was quite a major thing and I thought I wouldn’t want to see that dog suffering if I conclude my life” (Jess).

The importance of Jess’s relationship with his sheepdog was articulated in the language he used to refer to his dog (‘my sheepdog’, ‘that dog has been good to me’ and ‘I will miss that dog’) and implies a closeness between the sheepdog and himself. It is through the use of this language that Jess emphasised the trauma his dog had experienced through the foot-and-mouth crisis. Like himself, the dog had lost his role on the farm as a warden to the livestock, and Jess was able to identify with his own trauma and loss of role through identifying the sheepdog’s trauma. Thus, the bond between Jess and his dog gave Jess a reason to carry on living; he needed to look after the one animal left on the farm. The reciprocal relationship between farmer and sheepdog was equally important to Jake, who also considered the impact his death would have on his dog:

“If I was to go and do something what would she do that has actually passed through my mind, she is my best mate to be honest” (Jake).

Participants described their sheepdogs offering comfort and emotional support during periods of depression and isolation from people:

“Joey [his dog] would come in and stay with me. Joey would cuddle up with me at night times” (Jake).

“Yeah my dogs especially I love my dogs and the cows are nice and I just to wander over there to the cattle and look at them and everything but erm especially this dog we got her as a pup oh about eight months ago and that helped me so much you know? I am really fond of the dog and you know she channelled me in a different way I couldn’t keep clinging on to Joan and keep saying please give me a cuddle” (Dan).

In contrast to Jess’s description of his relationship with his sheepdog, Jake referred to his dog as his ‘best friend’ and uses his dog’s name when referring to it. Jake gave the impression that his dog epitomises the meaning of ‘man’s best friend’, as she is able to offer affection and company whilst being loyal. Like Jess, both Jake and Dan made sense of their relationship with their dogs as being crucial in stopping their suicide attempt. Moreover, their attachment to their dogs was stronger than all other emotional attachments in the participants’ lives at that time. In particular, Dan articulated that during these times of depression, his neediness for connection to people could not be met (‘I couldn’t keep clinging on to Joan’) and he felt unable to ask for ‘cuddles’, meaning the dog met his need for affection and compensated for Dan’s loss of human connection.

In summary, participants experienced their suicide as a logical solution to the unrelenting pressure of farming. For five of the six participants, suicide was considered an acceptable means of escape and had been thoroughly planned by imagining the method and act. For some, suicide attempts evoked strong sensory sensations and a simultaneous absence of physical pain. The prevention of suicide was considered in relation to their dogs, whether working sheepdogs or pets, and this emerged more strongly as a theme to not attempt suicide than a relationship to another person.

Super-ordinate theme 4: 'Feeling suicidal helped me to change my life'

In this theme, captured were participants' conceptualisation of their suicidal feelings at the time of interview as well as how their lives have developed since. For many participants, the interview was conducted several months after their (most recent) suicide attempt.

This theme consists of two subthemes; *'The end with the beginning'*, and *'The helpful relationship'*.

Subtheme 4.1: The end with the beginning

All participants described the personal growth that occurred after their suicide attempt. This included re-evaluating their sense of self-worth, their value to their family and friends and rebalancing their work-life balance. For example, Jess perceived his experience of seeking help for his feeling suicidal as essential to helping him transition into the person he has become today:

"I think there was the person I was up until two-thousand and one [when he attempted suicide] and the person I became I absolutely hated and then after about two-thousand and four [after suicide attempt and after seeking help] the person that I sort of hated slowly disappeared and I sort of the person that evolved into who I am now I think" (Jess).

Jess uses very evocative language ("and the person I became I absolutely hated") to articulate the difficult relationship he had with himself during his suicide experience. The phrase "absolutely hated" described Jess's self-loathing and how he was coping during the foot-and-mouth difficulties in 2001. Thus, Jess's suicide attempt seems to represent an ending of the old self, which he felt he hated, and his rebirth into his new identity, which was achieved through seeking help. Thus Jess suggested that his experience of suicidal

feelings and self-loathing during the foot-and-mouth crisis had motivated Jess to seek help. The help he received helped remove the part of himself he hated ('slowly disappeared'); it was transformational. Reflecting on his experience, Jess suggested that his suicidal experience led to a post-traumatic growth that had helped him evolve as a person. This was also echoed by other participants such as Gunner. In this quote, Gunner reflected on how his suicidal experience helped him to rebalance his farm life with his personal life:

"Football tomorrow and work tomorrow morning and care for our animals and yeah and take each day as it comes and enjoy me food and just enjoy the things we got and get a few things gradually as life goes on and won't set too bigger targets and not to get like I was for that short period of time" (Gunner).

Gunner's recovery has been focused on living day to day and in the moment, and focusing on the mundane pleasures of everyday life "take each day as it come" and avoiding targets that are too big to be achievable ("not set too bigger targets"). There is a sense of Gunner being gentle with himself by stating that he is making time for his passion of football ("football tomorrow") and enjoying food. He wants to avoid going back to how he was ("and not get like I was") and frames his period of depression and suicidal feelings as a 'short period of time' and a 'blip' in an otherwise normal life. For Dan, the end of his suicidal feelings marked a transition point in his life, whereby he felt able to enjoy other pleasures and take stock of what he feels is more precious than working, which he could not before:

"I definitely think so life to me now is so much more precious and since being like this and waking up in the morning and trying to smell the autumn fields to the weather and things are so much more precious" (Dan).

Whilst for John, personal growth followed seeing homosexuality and suicide among farmers being discussed on Countryfile:

“It actually made it much more gentle and much more dynamic and more and all the things and I think it was really really well done and also in er a programme with great respectability and people who who in the countryside everybody knows Countryfile and everybody would watch it and the approach a subject like that it would make people feel more empathy than they would have done before and more understanding and that would have done a huge amount of good” (John).

Within this extract, John conveys how the television programme sensitively broached homosexuality, which from John’s experience had been ‘unacceptable’ among farmers. The experience seemed to provide John with a sense of empathy to his own situation and what he had endured as a gay farmer. John’s phrase ‘that would have done a huge amount of good’ framed John’s hope that attitudes among farmers towards homosexuality would change thereby improving his self-worth. Therefore, John’s growth was fuelled by his perceived sense of acceptance of his sexuality among the farming community.

Equally, Bez found his suicidal experience transformational, as it led him to pursue a career in mental health and fundraising for mental health charities. Bez’s experience of suicidal feelings helped him re-evaluate his work ethic and how this influenced his mental health whilst he was farming. In the following extract, Bez discusses his decision to leave farming as vitally important in helping him meet new people and enabling him to have conversations about mental health that he would not have been able to have when he was farming:

“The happy ending the consequence of going through all of that was that I made some great friends people I would never have met before erm I have got a great career now unrelated to farming which I would never have had before erm in a completely different field yeah. You know the sorts of conversations we have now are completely different than we ever had you know back in the day. So for example my brother was physically unwell erm so his son rung me up and asked if I could help him out on the farm which I love cos it is like I love going playing farmers (laughs) but now and again ’cos I can walk away and leave it, and so anyway I went up there and erm so it was me and my nephew and his friend and we had a day working with sheep and er we got chatting I knew his friend not that well but I knew him. Sort of chatting catching up with the farmers and stuff and a bit of the local gossip as you do and he just sort of really naturally then just started talking about one of his neighbours really struggling with his mental health and erm and how he was having to reduce his workload and recognise that he has got some mental problems and he was feeling suicidal and quite low at the moment and need to take a bit of a life change and we had this and I just came away think we would never have had a conversation like that you know” (Bez).

Within this extract, there were three points raised by Bez. Firstly, he describes a ‘happy ending’ and a ‘pay-off’ for his lived experience of suicidal feelings; his choice to leave farming thus marks a personal and transformative growth that has enabled him to meet new people and pursue a new career. Moreover, Bez’s framing of his suicide experience as having a ‘happy ending’ is also meaningful. The ‘happy ending’ inferred that Bez had considered the positives of leaving farming, such as the opportunity to meet new people and make friends with people he would not have met whilst farming due to the isolation

and culture of farming at that time. Secondly, since leaving farming and pursuing his new career, in which talking about mental health is more acceptable, Bez felt more comfortable to talk about mental health with farmers – albeit the younger generation of farmers – rather than feeling ashamed. Thus, Bez’s new career normalised his experience of depression and suicidal feelings in the context of farming, so he has grown confident and accepting of himself. Thirdly, the phrase ‘playing farmers’ suggests that part of the reason he is well now is that he can choose when he wants to be a farmer – ‘playing’ captures the idea of temporarily assuming a role rather than this being his identity, and one wedded to various pressures, responsibilities and expectations. Thus, Bez felt freer after leaving farming and is now able to appreciate farming in a different way.

Subtheme 4.2: The helpful relationship

All participants talked about what they felt helped them recover from their suicidal experience. They reflected on the helpful and unhelpful support they received as well as how mental health support for farmers living in a rural locality could be improved.

All participants felt that talking through their feelings with someone they could open up to was paramount to their recovery from depression and suicidal feelings. Four of the participants (Bez, Dan, Gunner and Jess) received talking therapy from mental health services, whilst Jess and John preferred to speak to friends and family. In the following accounts, those who received therapy had mixed feelings about the usefulness of some specialised forms of therapy such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), whilst all agreed that needing to speak to someone who was supportive was key to their recovery and growth after they experienced suicidal feelings.

Bez found that, although he did not find it easy, talking helped him to manage his feelings:

“Having some having someone to go to that I can talk about things I don’t find it particularly easy I still don’t find it one-hundred percent easy and erm but I know that need to do it. So erm you know I can make that sort of first step or just have that conversation and just normalise things because for me... for me and just just chatting things through just sort of dissipates that really” (Bez).

Dan and Gunner had received manualised low-intensity CBT for depression from a primary care service. They both felt that this type of therapy and its delivery was unhelpful as the therapist was unable to consider and understand their individual experiences as farmers, such as their difficulties with isolation and unrelenting duties. This became a barrier to them feeling therapy was going to be useful for them:

“The CBT but it was not for me no and it wasn’t going to help me no. Because the chap I was seeing said something about cleaning windows and different things he doesn’t understand what is going on in my life and what was going on in reality. In my reality yeah I had to go home and somehow go and cut the cows’ feet and things like this and when you’re feeling that bad and that low and he tells you to go around and clean a few windows and it really did not help me at all. It would have been fine for some normal person in a town and yeah but I feel I am a bit different from those people yeah I shouldn’t say that” (Dan).

Dan’s comments reflect a difficult experience with local primary care mental health services. Dan made sense of the help received being inconsistent with his reality as a farmer; his phrase ‘It would have been fine for some normal person in a town and yeah but I feel I am a bit different from those people’ frames low-intensity CBT as not being suitable for farmers. He felt he needed to be understood in the context of his responsibilities as a farmer and differently to ‘town people’. Dan drew a comparison between his experience of suicidal

feelings and his duties as a farmer with other non-farming peoples' responsibilities ('In my reality yeah I had to go home and somehow go and cut the cows' feet') and suggested that the therapist failed to understand him as a farmer perhaps because the therapist was not a farmer.

Similarly to Dan, Gunner also received help from a local primary care mental health CBT service. Here Gunner describes his experience of completing the self-administered Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), which is a diagnostic tool used for the measurement of depression, prior to receiving any psychotherapy treatment:

"Because I will be honest with you some of the help that I have had and there is one [mental health service] some of those questions is what I call playing like noughts and crosses now I don't want to down anybody's help because at the end of the day they some other person might find benefit from those but they say you know marks out of ten what would you and I just feel that it was a bit like playing noughts and crosses and this week I am feeling two and next week I am feeling eight".

Gunner's language ('some of those questions is what I call playing like noughts and crosses') led to two interpretations; firstly 'playing' suggests that he did not perceive these questionnaires were an accurate way to measure his depression. Moreover, phrasing his answers as 'noughts and crosses' suggested his experience of depression could not be captured in this way as other people's might have ("some other person might find benefit from those") and that it had not captured his lived experience of depression. Dan and Gunner found standardised therapeutic interventions negatively impacted the therapeutic relationship, and their overall experience of seeking help had been negative.

In contrast, Jess and Bez described positive experience of psychotherapy. The importance of talking with others was echoed by Jess, who had felt unable to speak to anyone in the farming community or his family about his suicidal feelings as so many other farmers were also going through the trauma of foot-and-mouth at the time. Jess described his first interactions with 'Tracey', a mental health nurse he saw regularly, as liberating, since this was the first time he had felt able to speak about his feelings:

"The nurse [Tracey] was very good. Tracey was brilliant erm. Sometimes she was limited with time as is the case. But I needed time to speak to people and I needed time to talk. I would love to have more intervention earlier and I would have liked to have more time in a safe environment with the right people to talk and go through things" (Jess).

Jess stated that 'more time in a safe environment with the right people to talk to' would have been beneficial, which suggests that the farming environment and culture at that time did not make it safe for Jess to speak openly about mental health. Furthermore, Jess implied ("I would have liked to have more time in a safe environment with the right people to talk") that the right people to talk to were professionals who were non-judgemental of his feelings.

Accessing help through therapy, or speaking to peers, family or friends, was also conceived as helpful for the participants to transition and grow from their experience of suicidal feelings. In particular, for Gunner, speaking to another farmer who specialised in mental health support within the Farming Community Network helped him to overcome depression and suicide, reassuring him that his recovery was going correctly. Gunner framed the help as giving him the confidence in himself which he had lost whilst feeling suicidal:

“I think if Barry {FCN worker pseudonym} had come on board earlier [to help] that would have been better because he is a farmer and he has experienced it and it is just he could see how well I had done and I needed somebody to give me a bit of confidence that I wasn’t as bad as I had thought and somebody who knows” (Gunner).

“I rang Samaritans in two-thousand and two the woman I spoke to was good. She happened to be married to a dairy farmer in Northern Ireland and she had a very good understanding of the farming situation and I could have spoken to anybody and I am very grateful to happen to find myself speaking to the right person. She had a lot of understanding and a lot of time and compassion and was not judgemental and making people aware that they are not alone and they are valued” (Jess).

Improvements to mental health services and therapies were also identified as important to the participants. For all, an individualised approach to help being offered was considered more useful, whilst medication was considered a less personal approach to recovery:

“But I think I think er for me mental health sort of like everything else it is a very individual thing isn’t it? So what would have helped me was more of what the guy did er yeah just being there and just having the time to sit and chat and talk through things erm. I guess what didn’t work for me was the medication cos I just got on you know I was suffering from depression I didn’t I wasn’t erm I didn’t my my er diagnosis apparently at the time was clinical depression but I ended up on antipsychotic drugs and crazy crazy amount of medication and that didn’t work so I think yeah just someone having the time really” (Bez).

“I was aware that my health was deteriorating er and then I was sort of aware that I needed some help with it and I went to the doctors because I couldn’t sleep first of all I was put on

the sleeping tablets and they didn't seem to make a difference and after that I was then put on to antidepressants they were then changed and then the follow year they were changed again and then that was increased and increased and increased again and at the time I had become quite depressed. I started counselling and I came off antidepressants in the start of two-thousand and three and continued with counselling until seeing a general improvement in my health and my state and so on until that concluded in two-thousand and four" (Jess).

In both Bez's and Jess's accounts, neither felt that the pharmacological approach to treating their depression was right for them. Jess phrases 'increased and increased and increased again' reflected the continuous reviewing of his non-improving mental health and conveyed Jess's sense that his failure to respond to medication had further reinforced his sense of hopelessness at the time. Both found counselling and talking more helpful than medication. Bez emphasised that 'someone having the time' made the difference to his recovery. This indicates that for Bez and Jess, 'having the time' to talk to someone at any time whilst farming was more helpful in their recovery than pharmacological interventions.

In summary, in 'feeling suicidal helped me to change my life' participants' personal and transformative growth from their experience of feeling suicidal was captured. For all participants, suicidal feelings marked a turning point in their lives in which the participants were able to consider other aspects of their lives that gave them worth and value outside of farming. Participants reflected on the conditions necessary for farmers to seek help, such as an individualised approach to the help that is offered and therapeutic approaches which allow the therapist to understand the complex dimensions of farming identity, whilst offering a non-judgemental and supportive environment in which to talk.

Discussion

In this section, I will start by discussing findings from participants' interviews and integrating these into the wider relevant literature. I will then discuss the implications of this research for counselling psychology before considering any limitations and proposing future research that might expand on the knowledge gained from this project. In particular, I discuss the 'walk-and-talk' interview methodology and its usefulness for engaging hard-to-reach populations such as the farming community as well as its use for future qualitative research in counselling psychology. Then, I discuss the implications and recommendations for systemic change for working with the farming community to reduce the rates of suicide and set out social policy changes to address these issues. Finally, I summarise the research conducted.

Farming and masculinity

A pervasive masculine culture within farming was found to be a barrier to participants being able to talk about mental wellbeing and access help for their suicidal feelings from professionals, family and peers. Farming masculinity was found to be associated with an internalised masculine identity, namely, concealing emotions to protect other people's feelings. Each of these will be discussed in relation to the wider literature.

Internalised masculine identity

The findings from this thesis demonstrate a complex phenomenological relationship between farmers' own perceptions of masculinity and the expectation from the farming community that farmers will portray a strong masculine identity. In particular, it is indicated

that masculine traits such as being self-reliant and refraining from talking about emotions enable farmers to embody a strong hegemonic masculine identity. Masculinity is defined as the characteristics commonly associated with men, whilst hegemonic masculinity is a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and social context that legitimates unequal gender relationships between men and women and other masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995). According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculine traits are certain sets of masculine traits that are considered 'more' masculine. Furthermore, within the farming community, these traits are endorsed more than other masculine traits (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018). It is expected that boy and men farmers will express their masculinity within a normative concept for which farmers are held accountable (Kane, 2006). Previous researchers have identified similar masculine traits to those found in this research which farmers use to demonstrate their masculinity. According to Cush and Macken-Walsh (2018), normative hegemonic masculine traits in farming are the ability to work hard, 'displaying the necessary acumen to overcome difficult environmental and market conditions' and 'tenacity in the face of such challenges' (p. 728). In the sociological literature, the male farmer identity is described by narratives of hard work, self-reliance, being the breadwinner for the whole farming family (Brandth, 1995, 2016; Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018; Saugeres, 2002), physical strength and stoicism (Ni Laoire, 2001). These narratives shape the identities of farming men as strong and holding positions of power and esteem within their families and community.

The findings in this study were that the farmers perceived mental health issues and distressing emotions as weakness and a sign of being less macho. Such issues and emotions threaten their self-esteem based on embodied masculinity strength, self-reliance and machismo. Embodying hegemonic masculinity among male farmers has been linked to

concepts of self-worth (Bryant & Garnham, 2015) and an identity as the ‘breadwinner’ and ‘head of the household’ (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018; Ni Laoire, 2001, 2002). However, times of stress and psychological pressure are considered to threaten farmers’ masculine identities and self-worth (Alston & Kent, 2004) and a failure to portray these traits is potentially harmful to the farmer’s self-esteem and social reputation (Bryant & Garnham, 2015).

This study’s participants experienced their feelings as insufficiently masculine, which was pivotal in their experience of subsequent suicidal feelings. There is limited research on farmers’ awareness of masculinity as an influencing factor on their suicidality. Bryant and Garnham (2015) demonstrated that for some male farmers, the awareness of a ‘failed’ masculine identity led them to contemplate suicide. Furthermore, researchers found that farmer self-worth is correlated with high suicidality (Alston & Kent, 2008; Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Peck, Grant, McArthur, & Godden, 2009). Hogan et al. (2012) suggested that a rupture in the masculine identity of a farmer – perhaps caused by economic decline in livestock or poor weather conditions – can contribute to their decision to attempt suicide and/or change aspects of their identity to cope better with the demands of their situation.

Masculinity and belongingness

This study’s results indicate that all the men felt a sense of belonging that was geographical and generational, forming the basis of their farming identity. All the farmers, apart from one, referred to themselves as ‘farmer’s sons’, while their backgrounds in farming were similar. Their farming identity encompassed traits of loyalty and commitment to farming, which meant that non-farming hobbies were not pursued. The loss of interests, in turn, affected their enjoyment of farming. Similarly to Price’s (2010) findings, when describing

their personal histories, the farmers in this study did not start with themselves or their parents but instead positioned themselves within the generational farming family history. Moreover, farmers felt that home and farm were inexorably intertwined. Price (2010) also concluded that male farmers felt they had no life, options or identity outside of being a farmer, and argued that being unable to perceive themselves as a man in any other way may damage well-being and freedom. Furthermore, farmers' sense of responsibility for passing the farm onto the next generation negated their desire for hobbies (Price 2010; Price & Evans, 2009). As noted by Price (2010), farming men experience pressure, often from birth, to continue farming against personal desires and feel that if they are not a farmer, they have failed. This means that farmers experienced a sense of destiny and responsibility which helps to define who they are and where they belong.

In this study, socialisation to 'farmer' from birth meant that other skills and qualifications were seen as unnecessary in participants' later roles as farmers. Moreover, participants experienced a sense of loss that they could not enjoy non-farming related activities such as sport. Each minimised the importance of non-farming skills and interests when they were not deemed important to their farming identity, and maximised the importance of their farming specialisms, as reflected in previous research by the Farming Crisis Network (2003), who found that life-long farmers feel trapped in their occupation and struggle to transition or transpose their agricultural skills to other forms of employment. This becomes particularly problematic when the farm is uneconomical. The Farming Crisis Network argue that farmers' sense of belonging and loyalty to their identity can restrict their confidence to do anything non-farming related as they feel too uneducated and/or deskilled to do anything else, despite a wealth of skills and intelligence (Farming Crisis Network, 2003). In

the current research, only one participant had left farming and his farmer identity behind and transitioned into a new career, further suggesting that changing occupations and identity is difficult and participants feared leaving the patrilineal traditions of farming. Therefore, both Price (2010) and I suggest an unconscious 'rightness' in men's role of continuity which endows farmers with power, responsibility and the burden of restricted choices when their actions are a consequence of the patrilineal way of farming life.

The current results indicate the lack of agency these farmers felt they had in their ability to rebalance their work/life balance and wellbeing. The expectation from family members that they would become farmers and traditional patrilineal practices in farming meant that participants felt they had no career choice. There is limited research that addresses the distress male farmers experience from within their patriarchally-defined position as future successors to the farm. Minister (1991) argued that the lives of men, as well as their beliefs, expectations and activities, can be best understood by acknowledging their position in relation to their gender, and that it is through gender relations that gendered roles and identities are formed (Little, 2002). This is particularly relevant to the farming family, in which gender roles and identities are stubbornly patriarchal (Price & Evans, 2009).

Researchers that explored the patriarchal patterns in 14 Welsh farming families demonstrated that farming men can suffer as a result of these traditional practices (Price, 2010; Price & Evans, 2009). As Shortall (2002) noted, the strong patriarchal and social structures within farming families that encompass generational family history, culture and economics can be damaging to farming men's wellbeing. It is argued that the 'farming way of life', in which farming men have been raised as farming sons, leads to limited subjective life choices, often creating an identity that later in life becomes rigidly fixed as the 'male

farmer' (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Farmers consider it natural to occupy a caretaker role for the farm's past, present and future (Price, 2010), while the custodial responsibility to keep the farm working so it can be passed on to future generations was a key stressor for farming men (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Thus, it is not difficult to see the impact of pressure and failure on farming men when there is a financial or personal crisis that threatens the farm's survival and suicide is seen as the only alternative (Price, 2010).

Farmer coping skills

Findings from the current study indicate that participants' perceptions of self-worth and masculinity were reliant on the success of coping skills such as concealing emotions.

Farmers felt responsible for protecting their families and friends from their distress.

Participants feared depending on their families for emotional support, as this deviated from patriarchal norms and expectations of them as farmers, providers and protectors.

Researchers have found that the position of 'farmer' is constituted as being inherently masculine and is bound up in patriarchal practices such as being the provider for the family, while emotions were considered a weakness or evidence of an inability to cope (Bryant & Garnham, 2015). Andoh-Arthur, Knizek, Osafa and Hjelmeland (2018) used IPA to explore the accounts of family and friends of 12 (non-farming) males who had completed suicide in Ghana. They identified that deviating from patriarchal norms such as moving from being the breadwinner to becoming dependent on a spouse for financial support had been a factor in the suicides.

In this study, farmers lacked the emotional coping skills to manage their distress. The coping skills utilised by the participants included avoiding others, minimising and concealing their emotions, increasing time spent in isolation and perceiving suicide as an escape from the

pressure they were under and/or a method of communicating their distress. These findings lend support to early research by Booth and Lloyd (2002), in which they concluded that farmers have poorer skills for coping with occupational stress than non-farmers. Moreover, a lack of problem-solving skills is associated with suicide in non-farming men and perhaps reflects an inability to solve problems whilst going through an acute life crisis or suffering from mental health problems (Gunnell et al., 2005).

I found that farmers might disclose their distress to people they perceived as 'safe' and non-judgemental. For example, Jake spoke to his mother, whom he considered a farmer's wife, but who did not work on the farm and was not interested in farming. The decision to speak to a female member of the family instead of another farming male has been explored in previous literature. According to Hochschild (1983), men turn to women in their family for emotional support, as women are perceived to have more resources than men for managing the emotions and relational work of others. Hochschild's theory on the 'managed heart' posits that emotional work and the division of labour between men and women are based on gender biases. Women are responsible for the free, invisible work that holds households together and keeps others happy and comfortable. Emotional work is important and different for men and women, as each gender is responsible for doing different kinds of work (Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, women tend to perform roles specialising in face-to-face management of emotions, whilst men are expected to have 'male' jobs requiring the management of aggression (Hochschild, 1983). Women are considered 'emotion managers' who oversee more of men's emotions than men themselves.

Increased isolation in farming

Demonstrated in the findings was the farmers' complex phenomenological experience of isolation as farming becomes an increasingly mechanised industry. Participants felt that farming has evolved to become more self-sufficient. Farmers' daily duties are often performed in isolation from other farmers and family members, thus contributing to the isolation they can experience and prolonged periods of time alone with their suicidal feelings. It was revealed in a literature review that much existing research focuses on the medical, psychological and social context of farming (Behere & Behise, 2009). However, there is little evidence linking contemporary rural restructuring processes and farmer suicides. Researchers have demonstrated that the isolation caused by the mechanisation of farming has been a factor in farmer suicides (Gallagher & Sheehy, 1994; Garnham & Bryant, 2014; O'Callaghan & Warburton, 2017). The mechanisation and diversification of farming has led to a decline in labour-intensive farming and an increase in mechanised farming, part-time farming, rural tourism and environmental protection (Gallagher & Sheehy, 1994; Ni Laoire, 2001). This means that diversification has led to a rural restructuring process which has increased farmer isolation from other farmers, which was found to be detrimental to the participants in this research. Diversification arguably contributes to a reduction in farmers' statuses in their rural community and also in their available support networks (Villa, 1999). Suicide is more prevalent in rural farming communities where there has been an economic downturn and where mechanisation has led to reduced employment opportunities for farmers (Williams, 1997).

Suicide as a rational decision

The experiences surrounding participants' decisions to attempt suicide were related to an inability to cope with prolonged periods of occupational stress, which had become integral to a perceived failed masculine toughness and resilience. In particular, farmers expressed a sense that they had lost control of their lives, thoughts, feelings and situations, and therefore felt unable to cope. Thus, suicide represented a way of regaining a sense of control. In the following sections, key findings of loss of identity and purpose, and the sensory experience of suicide, are discussed in relation to a wider review of the existing literature in this area.

Loss of identity and purpose

A loss of role, purpose and identity preceded the farmers' decision to attempt suicide. For example, Jess stated that the traumatic loss of his livestock to foot-and-mouth disease had rendered him jobless on his farm. Researchers found that unemployment is the strongest predictor of suicide and near-lethal suicide attempts across 63 countries (Nordt, Warnke, Seifritz & Kawohl, 2015) and may cause feelings of hopelessness and thwarted belongingness (Van Orden et al., 2010). In contrast, Giddens (1991) argued that suicide arises from a crisis in subjectivity caused by the destabilisation of individual circumstances such as acute shock and/or sustained exposure to a destabilising environment, which was experienced by these participants. Giddens posits that these events and their meanings are not necessarily observed and understood by others, as these events themselves are packed with idiographic meaning at the individual experiencer's level. Nevertheless, events such as the culling of one's entire livestock can result in a rupturing of the individual personal referential framework of 'farmer' and their lived experience. Giddens stated that the

experience of loss of identity and purpose is often associated with a personal experience of shame. Moreover, the experience of shame directly impacts one's own understanding (or coherency) of identity as a 'farmer', and can cause anxiety if that person perceives their identity as inadequate (Giddens, 1991). In relation to the current findings, the loss of role and identity among farmers was strongly associated with feelings of inadequacy and confusion about how their identity would survive after the trauma they endured.

Suicidal feelings as a sensory experience

It is demonstrated in the results that the participants experienced visual and sensory experiences during their feelings of being suicidal. Prior to their suicide attempts, suicidal feelings were accompanied by specific visual imagery that featured their future plan for suicide and/or the aftermath of their death. Researchers have increasingly explored the role of mental imagery in the planning and completion of suicide among the clinical population (Holmes, Crane, Flennell, & Williams, 2007; Rivlin et al., 2013; Stopa, 2009). Research has concluded that when people contemplate suicide, they are more likely to experience mental imagery than verbal thoughts (Holmes et al., 2007).

The participants in this research experienced mental imagery related to their future planned suicide attempt such as where they would end their lives and who they want to find their body. These findings are consistent with suicidal 'flash-forward' research (Crane et al., 2010; Holmes et al., 2007; Hales et al., 2011). 'Flash-forward' imagery pertains to the mental imagery of a future suicide attempt, which can feel real and compelling (Holmes et al., 2007). Flash-forward researchers regard suicide mental imagery as a predictor of future suicidal behaviour, and it has been shown to be causal in determining a person's future behaviour (Libby, Shaeffer, Elbach, & Slemmer, 2007). Therefore, imagining an event

increases the likelihood of engaging with what is being imagined, meaning it feels more probable that the event will occur (Pham & Taylor, 1999). Rivlin et al. (2013) examined the suicidal experiences of male UK prisoners, finding that all participants who had attempted suicide had at least one mental image of their suicide before their attempt. These images pertained to planning and preparing for suicide (such as lining up razor blades, ropes and towels) and provided emotional reassurance about what would happen to them after their death (such as looking peaceful, a happy funeral, floating away and being with family members who have already died) (Rivlin et al., 2013).

The imagery that the farmers' experienced during their suicidal feelings was described as both distressing and comforting. For some, the imagery provided them with the option of escaping an otherwise hopeless situation and was personally meaningful phenomena that they did not expect others to understand. In some research, there have been comments on the personally meaningful relationship between suicide and cognitive imagery (Harris, 2000) and cognitive imagery is important within first-person accounts of suicidal and self-injurious behaviour (Spandler, 1996). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has been used to examine the experience of mental imagery among people who engage in self-injury behaviour (Dargen, Reid, & Hodge, 2016), highlighting the intense emotional relationship with mental imagery before, during and after self-harm. Participants reported that the imagery was comforting and fanciful. These authors also highlighted that individuals identified a symbolic meaning associated with their self-harm, for example, personal chastisement and images containing sociocultural motifs (Dargen, Reid, & Hodge, 2016), indicating that imagery associated with self-harm and suicide can be deeply meaningful to individuals.

Participants described the links between the imagery and the beliefs they had held about themselves, such as thoughts of worthlessness and lack of control. The struggle with a loss of self-worth, control and agency was found by Benson, Gibson and Brand (2013) in a mixed design study of 124 male and female participants with first-hand experience of feeling suicidal. The researchers argued that most participants did not want to die, but wished they could personally bring an end to an intolerable situation. Moreover, the participants felt that they had an inability to affect the situation they were in, and that this had led to a loss of self-worth and self-coherency. In this research, the farmers' imagining their suicide represented regaining control and agency by escaping from the demands of the role and identity as a farmer.

In this study, one participant's (Jess) suicidal ideation included an embodied sensory experience that took the form of emotional numbness and hyper-alert auditory senses. The unusual nature of these experiences meant that suicidal feelings were not a purely cognitive process and suggests that being suicidal was experienced as a physical, sensory and full-bodied experience. It has been argued that suicidal feelings are different from suicidal thoughts (belief, expectations and attitudes) and feelings of being suicidal (Benson et al., 2013). The emotional numbness like that which Jake reported has been found in other research into suicidal feelings (Benson et al., 2013). According to Benson et al. (2013), feeling suicidal constitutes a fundamental change to an individual's thinking, perception and emotional responses. Moreover, feeling suicidal goes beyond a cognitive process of planning and is what Ratcliffe (2005) regards as an existential feeling, a way of being in the world that structures our experience of the self and the world we interact with. The farmers all reported embodied experiences such as pain, strain and exhaustion, accompanying their

suicidal feelings more generally. Thus, the body can become a battleground and a source of discomfort and pain to escape from (Benson et al., 2013).

There has been no research exploring the hyper-alert auditory experience as felt by Jess during his suicidal episode where his plans to die were imminent. Much of the literature is focused on the idea of one's future death (Kashdan et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2014) rather than the experience of dying now.

DeWall and Baumeister (2007) and Kashdan et al. (2014) found that for many, the idea of death is perceived as a terrifying future event and therefore suppressed, which in turn helps to dampen the affective response to the threat (Kashdan et al., 2014). Kashdan et al. (2014) found that when people are confronted with the inevitability of their death, they use positive words to suppress the evoked anxiety. In contrast, the farmers in this study did not avoid thoughts of death, rather, some sought out time to be alone and consider suicide. Moreover, for Jess, there was a simultaneous hyperarousal of his soundings with a numbing of his senses (*'I did not feel I was experiencing any pain'*).

There is some difference in opinions about the experience of death between people who are distant from their death and those who are days/minutes away from dying (Goranson et al., 2017). Goranson et al. analysed the blogs of terminally ill patients and inmates on death row with non-patient participants forecasting their ideas about their future deaths, concluding that those closest to death used more positive and fewer negative words about their death. This resonates with the present findings, in which all of the farmers viewed the idea of their death as comforting, feeling that suicide made sense, thus they replayed their suicide plans repeatedly. The current study contains novel evidence that suicidal feelings

are experienced in similar ways to people whose death is imminent or unavoidable – acceptance and positivity regarding one’s own end.

Implications of this research for counselling psychology and therapeutic work

The current research has important implications for counselling psychology, which emphasises the subjective experience of the individual and collaborative helping relationship with clients, while seeking to understand an individual’s inner world and constructs of reality (Strawbridge, 2016). Therefore, counselling psychologists value the role of a therapeutic relationship of being with rather than doing to clients (Strawbridge & Wolfe, 2003), meaning therapy becomes a process of mutual discovery. Cooper’s (2008) view of how counselling psychology is progressing as a profession is especially relevant to individuals from rural locations and farming backgrounds. Cooper argues that counselling psychology’s core is that it “lies in a set of human values and ethics” (Cooper, 2008, p. 119). This is relevant for counselling psychologists working with people from hard-to-reach populations such as farmers, who have had their distress described with labels such as ‘rural stress’ in an attempt to reduce the distress complexity (Bossard, Santin, & Canu, 2016). Regarding the present findings, engagement with farmers to access psychological therapies could be improved by delivering integrative therapies and person-centred therapeutic methods such as those used by counselling psychologists (Strawbridge, 2016). Counselling psychologists are equipped to value the uniqueness of farming culture and the farming community, and recognise that these people are “distinct individuals, with a depth and complexity that far exceeds their diagnoses” (Cooper, 2009, p. 122). Moreover, these findings support the use of imagery to convey individual meaning and mutual discovery

(Reavey, 2011). Imagery could be used more widely by counselling psychologists when discussing topics such as suicide which has a visual component to its phenomenology.

Reflections on the use of walking and talking interviews

In this research, engagement with participants was increased by the innovative design of walk-and-talk interviews taking place on participants' farms. Walk-and-talk, also referred to as go-along, interviews (Flick et al., 2018) are not commonly used in counselling psychology research. Yet this method yielded insight that could be useful to counselling psychologists and researchers interested in introducing such interviews to their therapeutic practice and/or research method toolkit.

Although there is a lack of consensus regarding terminology and practice of using nature in therapy within qualitative research, such as nature therapy (Berger, 2003, 2004, 2005; Berger & McLeod, 2006), eco-therapy (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009) and outdoor therapy (Jordan, 2015; Revell, Duncan, & Cooper, 2014), walk-and-talk is a broad term used to encompass a specific therapeutic activity in which the therapist and client walk together outside for the duration of the therapy session (Doucette, 2004; Revell & McLeod, 2017). Walk-and-talk is not associated with any one model of therapy and can be integrated into any therapeutic approach or profession, including counselling psychology (Revell & McLeod, 2017).

Walk-and-talk therapy broadens the classic concept of the 'setting' of therapy as non-static and under the control and ownership of the therapist (Berger, 2004; Revell & McLeod, 2017). Walk-and-talk findings interviews have been found useful for improving the counselling process, improving collaboration, enriching the therapeutic relationship and taking account of professional issues such as safe working (Revell & McLeod, 2017).

Moreover, walk-and-talk therapy in groups for participants recovering from breast cancer has been shown to improve peer support, open discussions about cancer-related conversations, improve wellbeing and increase engagement in therapy (Ireland et al., 2018). Although no research has been conducted into walk-and-talk therapy for farmers, Price (2010) found that speaking to farmers in their own environment helped engage those farmers in the research. Therefore, based on past literature about walk-and-talk therapy and the experience of integrating walk-and-talk interviewing, implementing this methodology into counselling psychology and psychological therapies would be particularly useful for understanding the impact of environmental factors on the wellbeing of farmers, farming families and farming communities.

In this research, walk-and-talk interviewing provided an insight into farmers' experiences of being interconnected with their locality and farms' landscape. The prevalence of suicide among rural farmers is greater than those from more densely populated counties (ONS, 2017). Thus, the issue of suicide is perceived as being intrinsically linked to the locality as well as subjective experience. It was therefore important to explore how a farmer's farm was associated with their experience of suicidal feelings. The walk-and-talk interview around the participants' farms stimulated topics of male farmer depression and how their mental health was affected by the rural locality of their farms. The contours of the farming environment led to ebbs and flows in the participants' narratives. While walking and talking, seeing the expanse of their farms led to spontaneous reflections and the farmers talking about belonging to the land. These reflections may not have been discussed by simply asking questions in a typical interview-based design as these reflections were provoked by the farming environment. Therefore, as a methodology in phenomenological research, walk-

and-talk interviewing has the proclivity to provide rich findings that could offer a deeper understanding of how the farming environment and mental health interact.

The current findings from this research lead to questions to be raised about whether traditional clinical therapy settings, which are unconnected to the person, are the most effective setting in which to conduct a suicide risk assessment or therapy. It is indicated by these findings that the participants felt more comfortable talking about their suicidal feelings in a familiar environment and led to understanding how the participants had considered their environment to help complete their suicide. It is hoped that this research has highlighted the need for professionals, such as psychologists and therapists, working in the field of suicide research and suicide prevention to consider the role of context and the individualised experience of suicide to assist in better understanding and prevention of suicide among male farmers in the UK.

On reflection, the use of the walk-and-talk methodology in the exploration of suicidal feelings grounded the participants' feelings into the landscape in which it was first experienced. The participants' suicidal feelings were closely related to certain areas of the farm such as standing alone in a vast field or an empty barn at night. Walking and talking with the participants in these settings conveyed a depth of emotional and visual experience of their suicidal feelings. Therefore, connections between the participants' identity and landscape were made during the interviews.

The participants' mental imagery about their suicide plans and feelings were closely related to specific areas on their farms. It is difficult to describe in words some of the grim places on the farm which were visited, such as finding the dead sheep or the cold hilltop. Yet, these environments were central to the imagery the farmers experienced during their depression

and suicidal feelings and walk-and-talk made these more accessible. To convey the connection between feelings and place, future research which uses walk-and-talk methodologies, consent should be gained from the participants to take photos of the places associated with their depression and suicide and incorporate them into the results. This would make the findings more relatable and convey the visual experience of the participant to the reader. Furthermore, I felt these environments could have been discussed in more depth during the interview with specific questions about the environment such as 'can you describe how this place made you feel at the time?' or conduct a second interview to discuss the importance of these places to the participants' suicidal feelings.

The use of IPA in counselling psychology research

A further implication for counselling psychology research concerns the effectiveness of IPA and other qualitative methods for the exploration of farmer suicide, mental imagery and research conducted in the field as walk-and-talk interviews. IPA appears to be compatible with the ethos and philosophy of counselling psychology and can provide relevant findings to counselling psychologists as consumers and producers of research (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, counselling psychologists are flexible practitioners who can be creative and responsive and therefore have skills to adapt psychological research methods and so further our understanding of human experience.

Recommendations for therapeutic work with farming communities

Valuing difference and uniqueness is a key feature of counselling psychologists' work. Counselling psychology has its foundations in humanistic and person-centred therapy (PCT) (Division of Counselling Psychology, 2019). PCT offers a radical, non-pathologising approach to helping people heal and grow (Cooper et al., 2013). PCT is consistent with the philosophy

of counselling psychology as it states that all clients have the potential to “self-right”; that is, to self-actualise, become “more fully human” and develop their capacity to care for themselves and others (Hill & Cooper, 2016, p. 279). The person-centred practitioner values the power of the therapeutic relationship to provide a crucible for personal growth and transformation, whilst having the capacity to be a powerful agent of change (Cooper et al., 2013).

While the value and relevance of person-centredness cannot be denied, it conflicts with practices in NHS services that are based predominantly on the medical model (Rapley, Moncrieff, & Dillion, 2011). The emphasis of the medical model is on diagnosis and protocol-driven psychological treatment interventions provided in institutions of care. These tensions between personalised therapy and the medical model of depression feel particularly relevant to farmers. Results from this study indicate that this group do not find standardised treatments accessible or applicable to their way of life. This tension requires cautious consideration and careful manoeuvring to navigate (Walsh, Frankland, & Cross, 2004), yet counselling psychologists should be prepared to address these issues within services. According to Woolfe (2016), counselling psychologists are skilled in negotiating others’ world views and should feel confident to help shape services by emphasising the process of holistic formulation and practice-based evidence as well as championing relevant innovations in therapeutic care.

To some extent, counselling psychology is a post-modern endeavour in which attention is paid to context, discourse and philosophy (Henton, 2016), valuing the local narratives of individuals in therapy and research (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 1996). Thus, counselling psychology offers a partnership between research and therapeutic practice since both are

considered to offer a form of “social action to alleviate human suffering through increased understanding” (Henton, 2016, p. 137). Gaining insight into the lived experience of farmers through the use of walk-and-talk interviews could provide counselling psychologists, other allied professions and researchers working with hard-to-reach populations the opportunity to reconsider conventional interviewing methods and embark on methodologies which could increase participant engagement and facilitate a better understanding of experience.

In this research, participants who had received low-intensity CBT did not feel it was suitable therapy for them because it did not take into account the unique features of their role and identity as ‘farmers’. Researchers have shown a reduction in therapeutic retention if the therapeutic model is not person-centred (Cooper, 2008). Therefore farmers are less likely to seek or adhere to therapy if the treatment does not align with their subjective experiences.

In light of this study and its findings, psychologists and therapists working with farmers need to be able to offer therapies beyond CBT. Moreover, psychologists and therapists need to provide these person-centred therapies within the client’s home or as part of a walk-and-talk therapy to increase the accessibility of and engagement in therapeutic support.

Recommendations for policy change

In the following section, the implications of this study have been discussed in relation to recent research in public health and social policies into suicide and recommendations have been made for reducing suicide rates among the farming community. The findings from this study particularly resonate with other research showing that mental distress explains a relatively small proportion of suicides (WHO, 2012; 2014). Secondly, I have recommended a broad-scale policy intervention that improves farming populations’ quality of life and access to shared activities in social and community networks, thus improving their opportunities to

feel a sense of belonging, which the participants considered important in reducing their suicide risk. Finally, an increase in systemic support for farmers at busy times in the farming calendar, implemented by organisations like the Farming Community Network, and health professionals, namely, GPs, nurses and primary healthcare providers, offering counselling. To help develop these provisions, existing healthcare policies have been reviewed and suggestions for training have been made (HR Government, 2017).

It was determined in the findings of this research that mental distress among farmers was central to their decisions to end their life by suicide. These findings have been supported by Verrocchio et al. (2016), who carried out a systemic review of 42 research reports of non-farming male and female participants over the age of 18. They concluded that mental distress characterised by a subjective experience of guilt, shame and depression was a stronger predictor of suicide than depression. Yet, mental distress represents a small proportion of suicides, and other factors such as prior history of suicide attempts, presence of mental health disorder, substance abuse, financial crisis, failure in relationships, exposure to abuse, disaster or chronic physical illness increase the potential suicide risk (World Health Organisation WHO, 2012; 2014).

Participants in this study felt that access to shared social activities and community networks was important to maintaining their mental wellbeing and sense of social connectedness with other farmers in their wider communities. This is supported by Cruwys et al. (2014), who found that increased social contact with others alleviates symptoms of depression. Moreover, individuals who identify as being part of a group and met regularly with other people with lived experience experienced improved mental wellbeing (Bellack et al., 1981; Bright et al., 1999; Cruwys et al., 2014; Gleibs et al., 2011). As found in this study, a lack of

social connection with other farmers and community was implicated in the farmers' depression and suicidality. Perceived social isolation has been found to be a powerful longitudinal predictor of depression (Cacioppo et al., 2010). The present study's participants valued the time they had with other farmers in similar situations and opportunities to discuss their distress with others. Research has shown that social connectedness is effective in reducing mental distress among the general population (Cruwys et al., 2014) and even online social interaction, instead of face-to-face contact, has been seen to improve social isolation and wellbeing (Houston et al., 2002). Therefore services should look to incorporate social support groups and community-based activities that promote social connectedness and opportunities to discuss mental distress.

Deaths by suicides are generally regarded as preventable. In the UK, the government set out a policy – the 'Cross-government suicide prevention work plan' (2017) – to reduce suicides by 10% by 2020 in line with the 'NHS five year forward view for mental health' (NHS Mental Health Taskforce Strategy, 2017). The emphasis of this joint venture is that learning, data and information sharing and training need to occur across many different sectors, agencies and settings in order to prevent suicides. However, researchers have demonstrated that the majority of people who end their lives by suicide had not sought mental health support at the time of their death (National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety Annual Report, 2018). This poses a strategic issue for services to identify people who need support to survive their suicidal feelings if they are not accessing support services. This issue was reflected in this study, in which many of the farmers reported not seeking help at the time they were experiencing suicidal feelings. Furthermore, their risk of suicide was exacerbated by the lack of time farmers had to seek help for mental health away from the farm,

especially at busy times in the farming calendar. The participants' primary form of emotional support was from the Farming Community Network (FCN) who were able to visit the farmers at home.

Highlighted in the results of this study is the importance of specialised farming-based organisations (such as FCN) and the potential for primary care services to offer psychological support to farmers at home. Thus, increasing the access to mental health services at busy times of the year could reduce mental health distress and isolation in farmers and their potential risk of suicide.

To implement these changes, a broad-scale policy intervention and multi-systemic approach is required, which includes GPs, healthcare professionals, local farming organisations and charities accessing and sharing information and participating in training in suicide prevention, as set out in the 'Cross-government suicide prevention work plan' (HR Government, 2019). This strategy should include increasing and improving access to mental health services, for example, counselling services for farmers at home, with a particular focus on busy and difficult times in farming such as lambing season, harvest and prolonged adverse weather conditions. Furthermore, farming community groups should share information with other healthcare providers if there is a perceived risk of suicide. Local charities and farming organisations could help improve social connection to other farmers by offering online virtual groups and/or community social events, thereby reducing the social isolation experienced by farmers.

Limitations of the research project

While this study has led to an abundance of rich and detailed information regarding the lived experiences of suicidal feelings of farmers living in the South West of England, it is not without its limitations.

Due to time constraints, it was not possible to confirm the findings with the participants after completing the analysis. However, plans are in place to contact each participant who participated and feedback the salient findings.

Half of the participants asked whether I was from a farming background either before or during the interview. After disclosure of my background and professional status, there were no negative comments made about 'outsider' people, professionals or females, or about the perspectives of these individuals or their understanding of farming. This may have reflected participants' genuine regard for me as a researcher, but they may have also been reluctant to express criticism to a researcher who was also part of an 'outsider' group and services.

In this research, there was an attempt to integrate the participants' account of mental imagery as part of the lived experience of suicidal feelings. Half of the participants were able to articulate visual experiences into verbal communication, yet half did not disclose visual properties to their experience. Whilst visual material is used in psychotherapy and has been well documented for various psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Speckens et al., 2006) and social phobia (Hackmann, Clark, & McManus, 2000) and in individuals with past suicide actions and intent who report vivid mental imagery of their suicide death and its aftermath (referred to a suicide-flash forward) (Crane et al., 2011; Hales et al., 2011; Holmes et al., 2007), it remains an emerging methodological approach in psychological research. It is possible that those participants in

this study who did not present visual material in the interview might not have understood what was meant by mental imagery or were unable to articulate mental representations in a verbal format. To overcome this, use of a structured questionnaire, namely, the suicidal cognitions interview (Holmes et al., 2007) in which terms such as 'mental imagery' are explained, could assist in the participants' recall of mental imagery events.

Suggestions for future research

The current research represented an attempt to explore the lived experience of male farmers from the South West of England who had previously had suicidal feelings. There remains limited research in this area, particularly for farmers in the UK. From the little research published cross-culturally, the role of masculinity is an important factor to be considered by research practitioners and therapists alike. In particular, the current research is suggestive of the complex issues farmers face when asking for help and issues engaging in psychological therapy. Future qualitative research is needed to explore the experience of farmers accessing psychological therapy and to investigate which factors made it easier to overcome the personal conflict with masculinity which is highlighted in this research.

It was demonstrated in these research findings that gender was a significant factor in the lived experience of suicidal feelings for male farmers. Yet few researchers have explored gender relationships in farming families (Little, 2006; Lobao, 2006; Price, 2010), and there is no research to date on this phenomenon in farming in Southwest England. Morris and Evans (2004) conducted qualitative interviews with farmers and their families on repeated visits to international farms and interacted with all family members. They argued that meeting these people several times provided a greater sense of the gender norms in entire farming families. Furthermore, living in the area and being 'in the field' of the culture were crucial in

gaining trust, rapport and confidence. Conducting interviews over a longer period helped these researchers to immerse themselves in the practice of the farmer and enabled the farmers to tell their stories about the stresses of agriculture, increased workloads and changing pressures of global agri-economics that were making farming increasingly unviable (Price, 2010). Therefore, talking to the same family members several times to build rapport can provide a deeper insight into the sensitive practices of farming that would not be observed in a single interview.

While the current research contained an exploration of issues of life events that preceded participants' experience of suicidal feelings and the transformative growth that occurred afterwards, there remains a need to investigate these aspects more fully. Not all of the participants attended psychological therapy or received support from medical practitioners following their experience of suicidal feelings, yet all expressed that personal growth had occurred. Future research could be focused on the therapeutic relationship between therapists and farmers who have experienced suicidal feelings to determine the aspects of therapy that both parties perceived as helpful in building an alliance. In particular, a more detailed exploration is required to explore these lines of enquiry more fully and so determine what farmers perceived as transformational in their experience of asking for and receiving help, either from professional services or peers. These findings could help to innovate psychological therapy services by taking therapy to the farmer and engaging with farmers more effectively at home to sustain therapeutic engagement.

With this project, I attempted to broadly integrate and explore the experience of imagery as a feature of suicidal feelings. Whilst I did not aim to explore mental imagery in the experience of suicidal feelings and actions, this research does contribute to the body of

literature in this area and this could be useful for future research on UK farmer suicides.

Mental imagery is a growing psychological concept in research and psychotherapy, meaning it might be fruitful to explore the visual components of suicidal individuals' experiences through the use of art, craft and sculpture, thus using the visual to describe the mental-visual experience, rather than just verbal accounts. This is likely to yield a greater depth of understanding of the mental imagery of suicide and its meanings to the individual.

The predominantly male culture of the farming industry has shifted significantly over recent years as more females become 'the farmer', which has seen an increase of female farmer suicides both nationally (ONS, 2017) and internationally (Behere & Bhise, 2009; Arnautovska, McPhedran, & De Leo, 2014; Kumar & Hashim, 2017). Female farmers are likely to experience some of the same contextual and environmental issues that male farmers identify as influencing their suicidal feelings. Future researchers could explore issues of gender and role among female farmers working in a masculine farming environment and their influence on suicidality.

Conclusion

The super-ordinate themes in this study have echoed the existing research conducted into farming masculinity (Ni Laoire, 2002; Ni Laoire & Fielding, 2006) and suicide (Bryant & Garnham, 2015). The research has also determined that the phenomenological experience of suicidal feelings among male farmers is contextual to their environment and identity. Moreover, the suicidal feelings can be explored through the embodied sensory experience of the individual and this ought to be considered when exploring the experience of suicide among this population.

The research has derived fruitful accounts from participants because of its innovative use of walk-and-talk interviews (Capriano, 2009). Walk-and-talk interviews enabled participants to contextualise their experience of suicidal feelings to the landscape of their farms and provide a richer account of these feelings.

It is clear from the findings that suicidal feelings are a complex phenomenological experience and modes of psychological support must incorporate an understanding of the complex nature of farming and farmer identity. Further research is needed to explore aspects of psychological therapy that could improve farmer engagement and improve the therapeutic experience.

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Walking with farmers and talking about suicidal feelings: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Abstract

Objectives

There is a lack of information about how farmers in the South West of England (SWE) experience suicidal feelings in relation to their identity as farmers. This study adds to the limited research on the experiences of UK farmers by exploring how farmers with a history of suicidal feelings and/or attempted suicide experience these feelings in relation to their identity and rural localities.

Design

An interview-based study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Method

Six male participants with current or previous employment as a farmer in SWE were recruited. All interviews were conducted using a walk-and-talk interview method and taking place on participants' land.

Results

Three of the four super-ordinate themes from this study are discussed here. 'It is not macho to discuss your feelings' contains two sub-themes: 'Concealing difficult emotions' and 'There

is no time for anything else'. 'My suicide was rational' captures two sub-themes: 'I just collapsed because of it all' and 'The imagery of my suicide'. The final theme 'Feeling suicidal changed my life' and its sub-theme 'The helpful relationship'.

Conclusions

Participants' experienced a complex tension between their sense of masculinity and expectations on them as farmers, which fuelled their sense of failure, energising their decisions to suicide. Results indicate that farmers' decisions to suicide are influenced by complex social and personal factors and point to an important aspect of failed masculinity. Clinical implications, limitations and future research are discussed.

Keywords:

Farmers, suicide, IPA, walking-and-talking.

Introduction

This research provides an interpretative phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of six males in South West England (SWE) who have experienced suicidal feelings during their occupation as farmers. The rate of suicide among male farmers in the UK surpasses the national average of all suicides in the UK male population (ONS, 2018). Each week, one agricultural worker dies by suicide (National Records of Scotland, 2018; Northern Ireland Statistic and Research Agency, 2018). Research into suicide among male farmers has predominantly focused on practical factors, such as access to means and prevalence rates (e.g. Hawton et al., 1998). However, emerging international research captures psychological characteristics that may increase the likelihood of suicide in this population (Garnham & Bryant, 2014).

Quantitative explanations for male farmers' suicide rates

Quantitative research has been used to explain the higher rates of suicide among farmers compared to other occupations. Two explanations for these high rates will be explained: access to means and 'rural stress'.

Access to means to suicide

Some evidence suggests that farmers are more likely to attempt to suicide because they have access to lethal means. Booth and Lloyd (2000) found that farmers are more likely to be successful at suicides because firearms, ropes and poisons are available on farms. This is supported by the ONS (2017) review of suicide statistics between 2011-2017, which found that agricultural workers predominantly used such methods as hanging and firearms to suicide, which are more available to people working in agriculture than others, such as drowning or sharp objects.

Rural stress in farming and suicide

In Britain, the relationship between 'rural stress' and suicide was magnified after the agricultural disasters of foot-and-mouth disease and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the late 1990s. Contemporary mainstream media reports alluded to the socio-economic effect of these diseases on the relationship between town and country communities and were first to highlight the impact of culling on subsequent suicides among farmers (Peck, et al., 2002). Consequently, the psychological and financial implications of these diseases contributed to what was then coined 'rural stress' (Bossard, Santin, & Canu, 2016). This term has been used to represent multiple stressful facets of farming. Rural stress captures farmers' 'blurred lines' between work, home and family life (Behere & Bhise, 2009), and dependence on the farm for accommodation and income for multiple

generations of family members (Ramesh & Madhavi, 2009). Yet it is possible that 'rural stress' has different meanings for farmers now than it did historically.

Qualitative explanations of suicide among non-farming and farming people

Qualitative research into the lived experience of farmers with suicidal feelings has found a complex interplay between failed identity, farming values and masculinity. Australian farmers described themselves as being valorised as exemplars of masculinity, but that the experience of suicidal feelings rendered them as a '*fallen hero*' (Bryant & Garnham, 2015, p. 76). Suicidal feelings were made sense of through farmers' perception of their gender identity, the socially constructed meanings of being a farmer, and achieving a sense of masculinity and moral self-worth. Furthermore, research conducted with older farmers in the Midwest US found that loss of identity and pride, due to the farming industry's restructuring, threatened farmers' identities within their families, communities and histories and had precipitated their suicidal feelings (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Moreover, these farmers did not consider themselves unwell nor identify with notions of 'rural stress' or depression at the time of attempting to end their lives (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005).

Research aims

The aims of this study are as follows:

To phenomenologically explore the experience of suicidal feelings among male farmers.

To gain insight into how farmers make sense of feeling suicidal in the past and the impact on their identity as a farmer and their values.

This study contributes to this area of psychological research by exploring this topic in the underrepresented population of male farmers, without inducing risk to participants.

Regarding impact/dissemination, the research aims to:

Provide clinicians with an understanding of what it means to feel suicidal and be a male farmer in South West England.

Help improve relational approaches in psychological practice (such as psychological therapy) and inform the practice of healthcare professions who support farmers.

Method

Reflexivity

My interest in conducting this research arose from a farmer's suicide in my own community and my work as a psychological therapist. I share similar experiences to those interviewed and so to help to examine and bracket my assumptions I kept a reflexive journal.

Design

'Walking and talking' interviews were conducted with six male farmers living and working in South West England; data were analysed using IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is a form of phenomenological inquiry which is used to explore participants' personal experiences in detail (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA was used for this study as it required an idiographic approach, in which centrality and meaning of the participants' experiences could be explored in-depth. Furthermore, IPA is considered an interrogative methodological approach in its capacity to contribute to and question existing psychological literature on this subject (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The results from this study are, therefore, positioned within the context of existing relevant research and illuminate new findings that critique previous findings.

Participant selection and recruitment

There are no widely agreed criteria for suitable sample sizes in qualitative interview research or IPA interview research specifically (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Smith et al., recommend small sample sizes due to the idiographic focus of IPA, particularly recommending a sample of six to ten interviews for professional doctorate studies. After completing six interviews, I reviewed the data set with my supervisors and agreed that enough data had been generated for a rich, complex account of the men's experiences and that data collection could therefore cease.

Existing research demonstrates that people who feel suicidal do not necessarily present at healthcare services (MaSH, 2012). Therefore, all participants were recruited from non-clinical settings, specifically through a national charity, the Farming Community Network (FCN), which supports farmers at times of crisis. Caseworkers at FCN provided participants with introductory material about the research aims and recruitment criteria. FCN caseworkers referred participants to the research by providing them with a research flyer and asking them to contact me directly. All participants were recruited through FCN. Six participants were referred and participated in this research. Prior to participation, all participants were asked to read an information sheet and complete a consent form provided to them by the FCN caseworkers. Prior to interview, all participants were contacted by the researcher and completed a brief risk-screening tool, when they were asked to give details about their current risk to themselves. All participants completed this questionnaire and were deemed to be low-risk regarding self-harm or suicide at the time of interview.

Sampling strategy

Purposive criterion sampling was used for this research, which is the selection of participants based on their ability to provide data-rich information regarding particular phenomena (Patton, 2002).

Characteristics of the sample

The six male farmers recruited were aged between 22 and 65 years old. All were male, had a current or previous occupation in farming, were born and lived in South West England and identified as White-British.

All participants identified as having previously experienced suicidal feelings and a minimum of 18 months had passed since participants' last suicide attempt (if they had attempted suicide). All presented as low-risk at the time of screening and self-defined as having recovered from depression. Five of the participants were currently employed in farming. One participant had left farming several years prior to the interview.

Walk-and-talking interview approach

All interviews in this research took place in the farm environment, where the participant felt most comfortable, in a setting related to their experience of being a farmer.

Prior to commencing interviews, consent was confirmed on all participants' audiotape recordings. Interviews were audio-recorded using devices attached to the lapels of myself and the interviewee. Two devices were required to ensure all dialogue was recorded, and that background noise was minimised. I transcribed the interviews for analysis. The notation system used for transcripts was orthographic transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

All information that could identify the participants was anonymised or removed when the interviews were transcribed. All participants chose a pseudonym for their transcript.

Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes; the shortest was 70 minutes and the longest 110 minutes. The completion of all six interviews generated 243 pages of transcription for analysis.

All participants were given the option of a 'check-in' post-interview to check their wellbeing and have any questions answered. All were provided with a debrief form, which included my contact and supervisor information and support services available in the local area.

The interview guide consisted of pre-planned, open-ended questions. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview format allowed me to ask unplanned interview questions and respond to the participants' developing narrative as the interview progressed (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Data analysis

Each transcript was analysed in turn. I followed the procedure outlined by Larkin and Thompson (2012), starting by making initial notes for each transcript, which recorded my immediate reflections and observations. From these initial notes, emergent themes were developed within each transcript, and super-ordinate themes were developed for each participant by clustering similar themes together. A summary was then developed for each super-ordinate theme. Each super-ordinate theme was then compared with other super-ordinate themes within and across all participant interviews and connected to those that had similar thematic meanings. These themes were developed into a set of overall super-ordinate themes capturing the experiences of the entire sample. These themes were

labelled with titles that reflect the experience being expressed. The quality and coherence of the themes were reviewed by my supervisors to ensure robust analysis.

Ethical considerations

Prior to conducting this research, all procedures were granted full approval by the UWE Health and Applied Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). The research complies with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

Results

Super-ordinate theme 1: It's not macho to discuss your feelings

All participants perceived themselves as needing to embody a strong masculine identity, prohibiting them from discussing their suicidal feelings with colleagues and even friends and family. Participants particularly experienced conflict between the need to discuss their emotions and the need to remain 'macho'. This theme encompasses one subtheme that will be expanded here: *'concealing and minimising emotions'*.

Subtheme 1.1: Concealing and minimising emotions

All participants described concealing suicidal feelings and distress from others in their lives and perceived that discussing their feelings was not 'macho'. Bez identified traditional hegemonic masculinity as a barrier to speaking about his distress:

"Farming is very much a macho culture of just don't discuss those things and it wouldn't even have entered my psyche to think about it or have a conversation like that with anyone"
(Bez).

The phrase 'it wouldn't even have entered my psyche' to discuss his suicidal feelings further alludes to the unacceptability that Bez, as a male farmer, felt around disclosing distress to others and acknowledging it within himself. Furthermore, Bez's internalisation of this macho culture meant that he did not question whether concealment was helpful or unhelpful to his mental health.

The participants described a need to conceal their emotions to protect themselves and their identities as farmers from others' judgement. They felt that disclosing their emotions would evoke feelings of shame, weakness and inadequacy. Thus, 'concealing and minimising emotions' describes participants' sense they needed to hide their feelings and/or minimise their impact on others to protect their sense of self and masculine identity.

The threat to reputation was raised by John, who recognised that minimising his problems and not sharing them with others protected him from gossip and stigma. John, who had 'come out' as gay after ending a long heterosexual marriage, described feeling that any gossip about his sexuality could negatively affect his professional identity as a specialist livestock farmer:

"There is a lot of secrecy in farming as in you mustn't tell the next farmer what you know that thing about the the next farmer's and another farmer's worst enemy because they have got something you want because there is an awful lot of gossip in farming you know and that can be very damaging to families and farmers and that makes them very vulnerable... They will use it against you in some way or put you down for it" (John).

For John, the culture of secrecy, alongside 'an awful lot of gossip', within farming created a sense of vulnerability that information about you could be used against you. This prevented

any communication of emotional difficulty due to the threat of reputational loss. Alongside a macho farming culture, this created a toxic environment in which to experience mental health problems was exacerbated by the participants' need to conceal emotional problems.

Super-ordinate theme 2: My suicide was rational

The second super-ordinate theme identified the men's complex phenomenological conceptualisation of their suicidal feelings and accompanying sensations as a rational experience. All participants except one (Gunner) experienced their suicidal feelings as rational responses and saw suicide as a rational choice, both at the time of those feelings and during the interview.

Subtheme 2.1: I just collapsed because of it all

The circumstances leading up to the participants' decision to suicide varied. However, their decision to suicide was influenced by feelings of helplessness, failure or inability to cope with their role as a farmer.

Foot-and-mouth culling began on Jess's farm between 2001-2002, during which time he experienced a physical and mental overload of stress:

"I literally said to them [army officials on-site to manage the culling] I am breaking up and I just can't take any more of this, I am breaking up and I finished these phone calls. We were literally at a point then we had to wait then to get the various authorities and powers that be to get their relevant people in the relevant places to continue with the culling and I just sort of broke up and I said I am breaking up and I cannot take any more of this I am just going to kill myself" (Jess).

Jess's use of the words 'breaking up' suggests both loss of phone signal and his struggle to cope under extreme pressure. 'Breaking up' was interpreted as evocating language of a physical ending of the self; Jess could not cope with the reality of what was happening to his animals and his identity, which was evoked by the culling his entire livestock. The powerlessness Jess felt waiting for authority figures to recommence the culling was agonising. His decision to suicide, therefore, could be considered as his attempt to regain a sense of control over the situation and his emotions.

Jake began to think about suicide during a difficult lambing season, in which he had become exhausted by long hours, difficult weather conditions and family conflict. His feelings about suicide were associated with wanting to end the unrelenting demands of farming:

Jake: *"Yeah it just offered an end to er an end, it is a difficult question"*

Rochelle: *"What did an end feel like to you at that time?"*

Jake: *"A rest, rest (sighs) time off (laughs)..."*

Jake wanted an escape and he conceptualises suicide as taking a 'rest' from his reality, suggesting that Jake feels that rest was not possible in his reality. Jake suggested that time off is something he should have from farming. However, he laughed at this notion, demonstrating that he believed this to be a fanciful idea not aligned with the reality of farming.

Subtheme 3.2: The imagery of my suicide

This theme captures participants' experiences of mental imagery around their imagined suicide and its aftermath. Bez walked with me to the top of a hill on his old farm, close to a

cliff edge overlooking the sea, where he could see weather systems rolling in. The visual representation of his feelings of depression was a black cloud:

“It is a big black cloud, it is always the big black cloud yeah. So I always described it as this er because you know you get a lot of them up here and you could see them coming up from the left, and you could physically see them and it just you know and when they come over you know and they can literally throw everything into darkness. So yeah it was always a big black cloud. And it would sort of creep up on me and just descend on me yeah so yeah that would be quite regular regular thing” (Bez).

Bez’s use of words such as ‘creep up’ and ‘descends on me’ depict his experience of these feelings as unexpected and unpredictable, much like weather systems. ‘Creep’ and ‘descend’ also convey a sense of something monstrous, dark and deathly, that blocks out light.

The mental imagery of two of the participants related to the method by which they planned to attempt suicide. Bez imagined holding a bag over his head and suffocating himself, while Jess imagined hanging himself from a tree on a remote part of the family farm.

“It was a bag over my head and that was my preferred that was my ‘I am going to do it’. I can remember and I don’t know where it came from either, I was watching something on TV and then I saw something about babies suffocating I just thought that is probably going to be the most you know the most painless way of doing it and the least destructive for other people to find” (Bez).

“Yes putting the rope around my neck. Putting the rope basically attaching the rope and basically before erm making sure the rope was attached in the right place erm ringing the

police and making sure I got through to somebody in the police who was aware that I was serious and saying to them this is who I am, giving my details saying where I was to and where they would find me. I didn't want mother or father to find me. I didn't want somebody from the immediate family to find me, I wanted the police to come. I thought if they come with sirens blazing I thought that is fine" (Jess).

Bez played forward his suicide scenario in his mind; thinking about how his body would appear to others and the impact on those who would find him after he had completed his suicide. Therefore, his imagery was functional, helping him plan and evaluate the effectiveness of suffocation. Equally, Jess describes the imagery he experienced as helping him plan his suicide effectively and avoid interruptions. Like Bez, Jess considered the impact that discovering his body would have on his family. Jess felt it important to ensure his suicide and its aftermath went to plan; imagery helped him to plan the meticulous positioning of the rope and the right location.

For all participants except Gunner, suicide-related imagery was contemplated regularly leading up to their suicide attempt:

"A lot less scary a whole lot less scary, a lot more frequent and it was just almost like an air of inevitability about it" (Bez)

"It [thinking about suicide] felt like an OCD an obsessive disorder of that going on and on that is how it seemed constantly thinking about it." (Dan).

"About four or five times a day. The thought of erm just the thought of hanging yourself you know it pops into your head ((pauses 4 seconds)) about four or five times a day I would get these thoughts" (Jake).

Participants' narratives depict a similar pattern of frequently thinking and imaging their suicide. The experience of suicidal imagery for Jake as popping 'into your head' seems to suggest that suicidal thinking was effortless and spontaneous. Bez's phrase 'a whole lot less scary' describes a desensitising of suicide from scary to inviting. The 'obsession' of imaging their suicide plans gave farmers a sense that their suicide was plausible – as Bez says, 'it was just almost like an air of inevitability about it'.

Super-ordinate theme 3: 'Feeling suicidal changed my life'

This theme captures participants' conceptualisation of the help they received and how this helped in their recovery.

Subtheme 3.1: The helpful relationship

All participants discussed what they felt helped them recover from their suicidal experience. They reflected on the helpful and unhelpful support they received and how mental health support for farmers living in a rural locality could be improved.

Four of the participants (Bez, Dan, Gunner and Jess) received talking therapy from mental health services. In the following accounts, those who received therapy had mixed feelings about the usefulness of some specialised forms of therapy, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, while all agreed the necessity of speaking to someone supportive as helpful in their personal growth after feeling suicidal:

"Having some having someone to go to that I can discuss things I don't find it particularly easy I still don't find it 100 percent easy and erm but I know that need to do it. just having

that conversation and just normalises things because for me... just just chatting things through just sort of dissipates that really” (Bez).

“I got talking to him [a friend] about that [depression] and it does help discussing it I am glad I spoke to him about it” (Jake).

Dan and Gunner received manualised low-intensity cognitive-behavioural interventions for depression from a primary care IAPT service. They both felt that the therapist was unable to understand their individual experiences as farmers and that this became a barrier to feeling therapy was useful for them:

“The CBT but it was not for me no and it wasn’t going to help me no. Because the chap I was seeing said something about cleaning windows and different things he doesn’t understand what is going on in my life and what was going on in reality. In my reality yeah I had to go home and somehow go and cut the cows’ feet and things like this and when you’re feeling that bad and that low and he tells you to go around and clean a few windows and it really did not help me at all. It would have been fine for some normal person in a town and yeah but I feel I am a bit different from those people yeah I shouldn’t say that” (Dan).

Dan makes sense of the help he received as not being consistent with his reality as a farmer; his phrase ‘It would have been fine for some normal person in a town and yeah but I feel I am a bit different from those people’ frames psychotherapy as not being suitable for farmers. He felt he needed to be understood in the context of his responsibilities as a farmer; differently to ‘town people’.

Personal growth varied between participants; for some, it was captured as relief while, for others, it provided confidence to continue. For all participants, speaking to non-judgemental professionals or people enabled them to evolve through their suicide experience.

Discussion

In this section, I will start by discussing findings from participants' interviews and integrating these into the wider relevant literature. I will then discuss the implications of this research before considering any limitations and proposing future research that might expand on the knowledge gained from this project.

The findings were consistent with a broader review of the existing literature. Some participants' had a complex phenomenological experience with masculine traits (self-reliance and refraining emotional expression), which have been found to be endorsed in other farming communities (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2018).

This study found that the farmers perceived mental health issues and distressing emotions as weakness and a sign of being less macho. Such issues and emotions threaten their self-esteem based on embodied masculine strength, self-reliance and machismo. These findings are consistent with existing literature that a failure to portray these traits has been experienced as potentially harmful to the farmer's self-esteem and social reputation (Bryant & Garnham, 2012).

The experiences surrounding participants' decision to attempt suicide were related to an inability to cope with prolonged periods of occupational stress. A loss of role such as the closure of the farm, purpose and identity preceded the farmers' decision to suicide.

Research has found that unemployment is the strongest predictor of suicide and near-lethal

suicide attempts across 63 countries (Nordt, Warnke, Seifritz & Kawohl, 2015) and has been argued to cause feelings of hopelessness and thwarted belongingness (Van Orden et al., 2010). For some farmers, suicide represented a way of regaining a sense of control and this has been shown to be the case for non-farming populations whereby suicide and self-harm has been perceived as method of regaining control of their emotions and future (Skogman-Pavulans, Bolmsjo, Edberg, & Ojehagen, 2012). Lowered self-esteem, arising from masculinity-failure and perceived inability to cope were consistent among all of the farmers in this study. Research conducted in to farmer self-esteem and self-worth has been correlated with high suicidality (Alston & Kent, 2008; Bryant & Garnham, 2012; Peck, Grant, McArthur & Godden, 2009). Moreover, research by Rasmussen et al., (2018) into the suicides of non-farming men, found suicide was preceded by the individual feeling there was an intolerable discrepancy between their actual self and ideal self-performance. In relation to this study, all participants' critiqued themselves against an ideal self, which was derived from the hegemonic masculine culture of farming.

Results from this study have suggested that this group do not find standardised treatments accessible or applicable to their way of life. Those who found psychological therapy helpful remarked that receiving therapy from a professional who could understand the unique aspects of farming was important to their recovery. Thus delivery of person-centred treatments to farmers in rural locality needs careful consideration. According to Woolfe (2016), counselling psychologists are skilled in negotiating others' world views and should feel confident to help shape services by emphasising the process of holistic formulation as well as championing relevant innovations in therapeutic care.

Limitations and future research recommendations

In this research, engagement with participants was increased by the innovative design of walk-and-talk interviews which took place on the participants' farms. Walk-and-talk – also referred to as go-along – interviews (Flick et al., 2018) are not commonly used in counselling psychology research. Yet this method yielded insight that could be useful to counselling psychologists and researchers interested in introducing such interviews to their therapeutic practice and/or research method toolkit. Walk and talk therapy broadens the classic concept of the 'setting' of therapy as non-static and under the control and ownership of the therapist (Berger, 2004; Revell & McLeod, 2017), and has been found useful for improving the counselling process, improving collaboration between therapist and client, enriching the therapeutic relationship and taking account of professional issues such as safe working (Revell & McLeod, 2017). Therefore, implementing this methodology into counselling psychology research and practice more broadly could be particularly useful for understanding the impact of environmental factors on the wellbeing of farmers, farming families and farming communities.

Conclusion

Quantitative explanations for the high prevalence of suicides among male farmers fail to capture the complex phenomenological experiences of suicidal feelings. This research has supported existing literature that the subjective experiences of male farmers arise from the social context of masculinity (Bryant & Garnham, 2015) and lowered self-esteem and self-worth (Rasmussen et al., 2018). Furthermore, these issues are best understood using walk-and-talk methodologies in the participants own environment. Masculinity and rural localities can be barriers to accessing psychological support whilst therapies are also limited.

Nonetheless, participants' have benefitted from individualised therapy that considers the masculinity identity of farmers and their context.

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Appendix section

Appendix number	Title of document
1	Ethical approval letter
2	Inclusion recruitment and exclusion criteria with introductory information
3	Research flyer used to recruit client
4	Participant information form
5	Participant consent form
6	Risk screening tool
7	Participant debrief form with contact details of support services
8	Interview Schedule Questions
9	Example of theme development for 'Bez'.

Appendix 6: Risk screening tool



Risk Screening Tool Prior to Interview

Risk screening assessment tool to be used at time of recruitment to determine suitability for study.

GP surgery and GP name:

Contact telephone number:

GP surgery address details :

This information is taken in case of an immediate risk and notification of the GP is required for clinical support.

Harm to Self

Is there a history of previous harm to self, including suicide attempts, deliberate self harm (DSH), unintentional self harm, self-neglect or hazardous behaviour?

Yes

No

Thoughts or plans which suggest there is an immediate risk of suicide?

Yes

No

Suffers from a major mental illness?

Yes

No

An expression of concern from others about you being at immediate risk of harm?

Yes No

ACTION PLAN – GP NOTIFICATION yes or no.

Appendix 8: Interview Schedule Questions



Interview Schedule Questions

- Can you tell me about your experience being a farmer in Devon/South West?
- What does it mean to have felt low and depressed as a farmer here?
- What sense does the farming community make sense of suicide among male farmers?
- What has been your experience of feeling suicidal in the past – personally and with others?
- How did you feel about the experience of suicide at the time?
- How did these feelings affect you day to day?
- What images did you associate with your feelings?
- What sense have you made of your feelings about that time?
- What does this place mean to your experience of suicide (setting of the interview)?
- How can mental health and farming community services support you better?