

**THE DARK SIDE OF GEMEINSCHAFT:
CRIMINALITY WITHIN RURAL COMMUNITIES**

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This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in
Crime Prevention and Community Safety: An International Journal.

The definitive publisher-authenticated version –
Barclay, E; Donnermeyer, JF; Jobes, PC; ‘The Dark Side of Gemeinschaft:
Criminality within Rural Communities’, published in
Crime Prevention and Community Safety, 2004/08/01, volume 6, issue 3,
pgs 7-22, published by Palgrave Macmillan –
is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpcs.8140191>

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ABSTRACT

Two studies of agricultural crime in Australia found that rural communities have informal social norms for tolerating certain types of crime and for proscribing the reporting of such crimes. Many victims of crime suffered in silence. Some were pressured to conform, keep the peace, and not accuse someone in the community of theft under threat of exclusion from the community. Some victims were judged to be deserving of their victimisation. The extent to which these attitudes and behaviours prevail in rural communities was investigated through mail surveys and interviews with farmers. While the studies focused upon agricultural crimes, it is suggested that these same cultural practices and social judgements are likely to be extended to several other crimes, including alcohol-related violations and sexual assault, and to other situations where the Gemeinschaft-type qualities within rural communities encourage crime.

Key Words: Gemeinschaft, Victim Blaming, Agricultural Crime, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe cultural practices and social patterns that enable crime to persist in rural communities in Australia. Rural communities are often described in the popular media and criminology alike as having qualities of friendliness, togetherness, honesty and low crime rates, qualities that social scientists refer to as *Gemeinschaft*. However, recent scholarly attention given to rural crime^{1, 2} has demonstrated that such qualities are not universal and that their relationship to crime varies considerably in different kinds of rural communities.

Many of the most widely accepted criminological theories focus on factors that contribute to social disorganisation and other criminogenic phenomena within urban communities and the corresponding lack of social control that inhibits criminal behaviour.^{3,4} Only infrequently examined is the idea that communities with high levels of social organisation and social control inhibiting members' deviant behaviour, may also contribute to certain types of crime. Historically, the focus on urbanism has led to the relative neglect of research on crime in rural communities.⁵ Yet, rural communities offer interesting possibilities for the study of crime because their smaller size allows the criminologist to observe patterns that may be obscured in the urban milieu.

This paper presents the findings of a study of livestock theft in rural Australia and the community context in which these crimes occurred. The study follows research conducted in 2001, which investigated the extent and impact of property crimes on farms within New South Wales.⁵ The study included a mail survey of 1100 farmers,

plus interviews with those who had been victims of crime and interviews with police stationed in rural areas. It was the pattern of findings from this study, which first led to the notion that communities with high cohesiveness actually enable the commission of some types of crime. In the sections that follow, the main findings of the original research are briefly outlined, the background and the theoretical premise for the present study on livestock theft is presented and the findings are discussed in terms of how Gemeinschaft-like communities display their own unique patterns of crime.

Results of the Original Study

Of the total sample of 620 respondents to the original mail survey, 69% reported experiencing some type of property crime over the previous two-year period (See Table 1). The most common types of crime were the thefts of tools and other small equipment, livestock and fuel. Illegal trespassers and shooters were also a major problem. Individual financial losses of up to \$100,000 were reported. The greatest losses were associated with livestock theft. Livestock was the primary source of income for the majority of the participants in the study.

Insert Table 1 here

Background for the Current Study

New South Wales Police⁶ describe livestock theft as the most significant rural crime. While the theft of tools and equipment from farms is analogous to the theft of tools and equipment from any other business, the theft of livestock equates to the theft of a significant proportion of an annual business income as well as the propensity to earn in subsequent years (through the loss of breeding stock and blood lines). It is important to note that insurance is only available for valuable or stud animals. Consequently, thefts of general stock, which can be as much as \$70,000 in one incident, are a complete loss. Such losses cause significant hardship for producers, particularly in the wake of several years of drought and economic decline in rural Australia. Of national concern is that stolen stock with fraudulent health status papers might enter the marketing and processing chain and endanger Australia's domestic and international trade.⁷

There are three main types of livestock theft:

- Professional stock theft: These crimes are committed by highly skilled, well-equipped, and well-organised thieves with a ready market for stolen stock. These thefts usually involve large numbers of stock.
- The taking of a single animal for food: There appears to be a general acceptance amongst farmers that this type of crime is commonplace and there is little that one can do to prevent it.
- Local theft from other farmers for economic sustainability or to improve bloodlines: Frequently these crimes occur between neighbouring properties. When confronted the thief will often claim that the stock must have strayed.⁸

Current official crime data reveal that approximately \$6 million worth of livestock are stolen on an annual basis across Australia. However, authorities believe this figure considerably under-estimates the actual losses because many incidents are not reported.⁹ An analysis conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology estimated that livestock theft costs \$49 million in total losses to producers.¹⁰

Less than half of all crimes reported in the original study had been reported to police. The reasons for this (see Table 2) were that many farmers believed reporting thefts were a waste of time because it is virtually impossible to retrieve stolen stock or convict offenders because thefts are so hard to prove.

Insert Table 2 here

Farmers also fail to report thefts because they are often unsure if and when a crime occurred. The stock may have merely strayed or died from natural causes. Often too much time passes before a crime is detected. Producers can remain unaware of losses until mustering, which can be as infrequent as once a year on large outback properties. Farmers also believe that police are often unable or unwilling to do much about stock theft investigations.

Several farmers preferred to deal with the problem themselves. If they became aware of their stock on a neighbour's property, they just rounded them up and bought them home. Some reported that living in a small community would make reporting a suspect in the district very difficult. Police officers interviewed complained that there is a code of

secrecy amongst farmers in rural communities, which deny them the information required to secure a warrant and target offenders. Some people withhold information fearing retribution. Some will inform police about a criminal activity but will not name the suspect.

Many of the farmers interviewed reported that they were experiencing ongoing livestock theft at the hands of a neighbour or someone in the close vicinity. Some had gone out of the livestock business; two had reached the point of selling their properties because of the financial losses. One farmer, who had tried to warn others in his district about his immediate neighbour who was stealing his stock, was pressured to keep the peace under threat of exclusion from the community. He believed he was greatly wronged. Whether or not he was a victim of theft, his story demonstrates the impact of community dynamics on such events.

The farmer ran sheep and cattle on 12,000 acres and had been farming in the same district for thirty years. He also had a full-time job with a government department in a neighbouring town. He suspected that one neighbour was regularly stealing his stock. Thefts occurred each year of one or two cattle and about 100 to 150 sheep (usually 40 at a time).

He had no trouble with other neighbours, nor on another block of land he leased in the area, nor with any stock he had placed on agistment. He counted stock every second day. He estimated that he had only reported about 10% of the thefts because he believed it was a waste of time reporting. He wrote:

The police have ignored my reports of theft and have said that I have to prove the sheep were mine. The police did not listen to both sides nor did they take into account the circumstances. The criminal party made so much fuss that the police were saying he must be innocent. We actually found our livestock on the neighbour's property as a result of observing a lamb sold. There were some shearers who told us they witnessed the thefts, but they refused to give evidence. They get intimidated. There is a fair bit of 'Rural Mythology' that allows these matters to be glossed over.

The police concluded that the stock probably strayed because the farmer had a full-time job with a government department in the neighbouring town and was away from the property much of the time. They claimed his stock loss probably resulted from his poor managerial practices and inadequate fencing. The farmer had taken the neighbour to court because he had not paid his share of the fencing between their two properties. Although the case was successful, he recovered only one-third of the costs actually claimed. To make matters worse, he felt isolated in the community for reporting the crime. His credibility was played against the neighbour's:

The neighbour painted my name in the community as a bad farmer and therefore I deserve to have stock stolen. The neighbour has a high standing in the community and the police know him well. He threatened me with a defamation suit for accusing him of theft. There was a lot of social pressure to maintain the peace combined with pressure to exclude us from the community. People tell you not to talk about it and that it's not worth the hassle. You have to get on with neighbours and maintain good will. A bad neighbour is a real liability – a good neighbour is everything.

This kind of frequently reported experience formed the basis of enquiry for our second study. The strength of unity between neighbours is revered in rural Australia, particularly in times of flood, bushfires and droughts. Therefore the question remains, why would offenders violate that social norm in the first place – why jeopardize the relationship with their immediate neighbours? And how can they live with their neighbours and with themselves and commit such a crime?

In searching for a theoretical explanation, Sykes and Matza's (1957) *Techniques of Neutralisation* provided a useful starting point.¹¹ Sykes and Matza did not believe that there is a distinct criminal sub-culture. They based this conclusion on their observations that offenders do experience guilt or shame, they usually admire honest people, and they define a distinct line between people they can victimise and those they cannot. Criminals are also influenced by their surroundings and are susceptible to social rules and expectations. Sykes and Matza posited that offenders develop techniques of neutralisation: distinct justifications for their criminal acts. This neutralisation is an effort to protect themselves from self-blame and the blame from others. The techniques include five distinct types: the denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties.¹²

- Denial of responsibility: Offenders define themselves as not being responsible for an action. With tough times on the land caused by drought and low commodity prices, some offenders may believe they have no alternative but to take a few stock.
- Denial of injury: Offenders view their behaviour as not causing any great harm. Offenders may claim that the victim is wealthy and can afford the loss.¹³ The

original study revealed that corporate farms, or wealthy property owners residing in Sydney's finer suburbs with a manager running the property, were more likely to have been victimised. Outlaw heroes such as Robin Hood, seeking justice outside the law, still capture the popular imagination and the offender may view his/her acts as part of a similar role.¹⁴

- Denial of the victim: Offenders believe their crime is a form of rightful retaliation or punishment. The offender takes up the position of an avenger and the victim is transformed into a wrongdoer.¹⁵ In the case study described above, the victim was a full time government employee – an 'outsider' not considered to be a 'real' farmer and labelled as a 'bad manager' who deserved to lose his stock.
- Condemnation of the condemners: Offenders may focus upon those who disapprove of their behaviour and determine they are hypocrites or deviants in disguise.¹⁶ For example, some farmers believed that the police and livestock agents were involved in livestock thefts and cannot be trusted. Farmers may believe government policies exploit farmers, which justifies a disregard for the established law. By shifting the blame to others, offenders may be able to repress the feelings that their acts are wrong.
- Appeal to higher loyalties: Deviation from certain social norms occurs not because such norms are rejected but because other norms are more pressing or involves a higher loyalty.¹⁷ Some farmers believe that farmers in desperate financial straits may be the culprits. Offenders may argue that their family depends upon them; they have to keep their farm going and they are just doing what they must do to survive.

Thus neutralisation techniques allow the offender to live within a highly cohesive or Gemeinschaft community and hold general beliefs that theft is morally wrong, but under certain circumstances it is justifiable, even necessary. The present study examined what happens if these techniques of neutralisation become embedded in the dominant culture. Anecdotal evidence gathered in the original research suggested that familiarity within a farming community ensured that residents made allowances for a certain level of deviance. The need for all residents to conform to group norms to protect the strength of a unified community meant that some crimes were overlooked. As one farmer reported,

Quite a number of farmers have said to us: 'If you can't accept theft as being as inevitable as death and taxes, you don't belong'. Another told us: 'If you can't keep track of your stock, then you don't deserve to have them. Only a poor manager loses his stock'.

The Deservingness of Victims

It is the concept of the *deservingness* of the victim that was the focus of the present study. It was hypothesised that the presence of attitudes within communities regarding the *deservingness* of victims facilitated offenders employing neutralisation techniques to enable them to commit crime. There may be an additional neutralisation technique present here: *It's not really a crime, because many people in this community would believe the victim deserves it.* The aim of the present study was to investigate the extent to which such attitudes prevail within rural communities, particularly when it comes to livestock theft.

The tendency for humans to blame victims for their misfortune receives considerable attention from researchers in social psychology and social problems. Heider,¹⁸ the proponent of attribution theory, believed that most people act as naive psychologists and attempt to identify the causes of others' behaviour or circumstances. Victim blaming can be defined as an attribution error. This occurs when individuals overemphasise personal attributes and discount environmental attributes in their judgments of others.¹⁹ In addition, individuals may be more likely to blame the victim if they hold a strong belief in a just world, that the world is mainly a safe and fair place in which to live.²⁰ Those who believe in a just world may be more inclined to believe that 'good things usually happen to good people' and that 'bad things usually happen to bad people'. Thus, the judging individual may assume that other peoples' problems are very likely their own fault. For example, one of the most disturbing aspects of sexual assault is that people often blame the victims of rape. Such effects have been replicated in many studies with a variety of populations and across several countries.²¹

A related concept to victim blaming, is Feather's work²²⁻²⁶ on *deservingness*, which has been used to guide the design and analysis of the present study. In a series of studies, Feather examined how subjects evaluated a positive or negative action that resulted in either a positive or negative outcome. Feather's studies have included evaluations of students cheating in examinations, penalties given to offenders, as well as various actions by police or politicians. The degree to which the protagonist in each story was perceived to deserve an outcome was found to be related to beliefs about the protagonist's responsibility (or lack of responsibility) for the action that led to the outcome and also to the subjective values that are assigned to the action and its

outcome. Personal responsibility for an outcome was attributed to a person when the outcome was perceived to be produced by the person and related to the person's intentions or to a person's social role obligations. How subjects rated the seriousness of an action was also influenced by the extent to which the protagonist was seen to be responsible for the act, the degree to which the act was followed by further negative consequences, and the level to which the act violated social norms, rules or expectations. Judgments of deservingness were also related to whether the protagonist was liked or disliked by the person making the judgement, or was seen to have strong or weak character, or belonged to that person's in-group or was a member of an out-group. For example, a protagonist who had committed a deviant act but was well liked, was seen to have high moral integrity or was a member of a person's in-group, may be perceived to deserve a negative outcome much less than a person who was disliked or who was seen to have low moral integrity, or who belonged to some out-group. Thus 'deservingness' is defined as a central justice-related concept that operates in situations where important values about fairness and justice are activated, where judgments can be made about the degree to which a person is causally responsible for an action and its outcome and the perceived seriousness of the action and its outcome.²⁸

METHOD

The present study of livestock theft employed Feather's methodology of assessing the deservingness of an outcome following an action. The study also incorporated a measure of respondent's preferences in making internal attributions (victim blaming) or external attributions (society blaming), in order to achieve a more comprehensive

understanding of the way rural people evaluate livestock theft. The 620 respondents to the original study of farm crime were re-surveyed by mail. The questionnaire was designed and piloted with 100 farmers as well as a group of 30 rural science students at the University of New England before being mailed to participants in August 2002. A covering letter outlining the purpose of the study accompanied each questionnaire. A reminder notice and questionnaire was sent to non-respondents after four weeks. A final reminder was mailed following a further four weeks.

Participants in the survey were asked to evaluate three scenarios, which were presented as news items that described three common types of livestock theft: a professional theft of two truckloads of cattle, a simple theft of one animal for food, and a scenario based upon the case study presented above, of the theft of stock at the hands of a neighbour from a farmer who also had a full-time, off-farm job. It was predicted that respondents' ratings would be significantly more sympathetic towards the victim of professional theft, less compassionate regarding neighbourhood theft and even less compassionate regarding the single animal theft.

Scenario 1:

CATTLE THEFT DEVASTATES GRAZIER

Police report that in the early hours of Monday morning, 94 Black Angus cattle valued at \$62,000 were stolen from a block located on the main highway 15 km south of the town.

‘This is a big theft, normally it’s only a couple to a half dozen’, Sergeant Peter George said yesterday. He described the theft as a well-planned professional operation. He believed the same thieves were responsible for the loss of 15 head of Black Angus from the local saleyards a fortnight ago.

Well-known local grazier Mark Jacobs is devastated by the loss: *Those cows were going to have calves that we would have sold next year. That was income we were relying on,* he explained: *The gates were locked,* he said. *It would have taken the thieves two to three hours to muster the cattle by motorbike and a further hour to load them into semi-trailer.*

Sergeant George believes the thieves had knowledge of the property, as no one lived on the block. There were no neighbours in the vicinity, and the stockyards were not visible from the highway.

Scenario 2:

LOCAL MAN FINED OVER SHEEP THEFT

James Reed was fined \$100 and was placed on a good behaviour bond for one year for the theft and slaughter of a sheep, the property of his neighbour. Police found the remains of the sheep with the neighbour’s earmark in Reed’s yards, which provided evidence of the neighbour’s ownership. Reed’s defence was that the neighbour’s sheep were always coming onto his property looking for feed, and that he had mistakenly killed the animal believing it to be one of his own.

Scenario 3:

Letter to the Editor
A CASE OF MUD STICKING

SIR: I refer to an article (p.65, June 25) in which local police complain about the lack of reporting by farmers of cases of stock theft. On several occasions I have reported thefts from my property at the hand of my neighbour and to date nothing has come of it. There have been around 100 sheep per year go missing, usually 40 at a time. We found the sheep on the neighbour's property but the police claim I have to prove the sheep are mine.

My neighbour and his wife have a high standing in the community. They have blackened my name in the community as a bad farmer and therefore I deserve to lose stock.

The police would not lay charges against my neighbour, as they believe the stock probably strayed because I have a full time job as a public servant in town and am away from my property much of the time. They claimed the loss of the stock was a result of my poor management practices and inadequate fencing.

Yet I check my stock every week and I have repaired the boundary fence.

I feel as though I have been made a victim twice over. Experiences such as these do nothing to encourage farmers to report crimes.

(Name Withheld)

Each scenario could take two forms. In the professional theft scenario, the descriptions differed in the degree to which the victim was responsible regarding security on farm. Concerning the case of the theft of a single animal, the penalty applied to the offender varied between a conviction in one scenario, and being cleared of all charges in the other. The third scenario of neighbourhood theft varied by the gender of the victim. In one version, the status of the victim was a male with a full time job, and in the other, the victim was a single mother who ran the property with the help of her son. The order and variance of the 3x2 scenarios were randomly distributed in the surveys in approximately equal numbers to prevent order bias in responses.

Following Feather,²⁹ participants were asked to evaluate each scenario using 7-point scales keyed to the dependent variables (perceived seriousness of the event, perceived responsibility for the theft, perceived deservingness of the victim for the loss incurred, the degree of sympathy felt for the victim, and the perceived deservingness of the penalty applied to the offender) (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 here

Victim Blaming

In the original farm crime survey, respondents were asked to identify what they considered were the main reasons crime on farms occurred. From their responses, five measures of society blame and five measures of victim blame were constructed into a scale to assess respondent's preferences for internal or external attributions when making moral judgments about farm crime (Table 4). The idea for this scale was developed from Mulford et al.²⁹ Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed that some farmers become victims of crime according to the following five factors of victim blaming and five factors of society blame.

Insert Table 4 here

The reliability measures for the two scales were 0.65 for Society Blame and 0.79 for Victim Blame. The reliability analysis suggested removing the item 'crime is just a fact of life' from the Society Blaming scale. This increased the alpha rating of the scale to 0.68.

RESULTS

The response rate to the mail survey of farmers, after allowing for ‘return to senders’ was 70%, which provided data on a sample of 406 respondents. These included 278 males and 128 females. Their ages ranged between 17 and 86 years (Mean 55 yrs, SD 13.54 years). Analysis of the data was dependent upon non-parametric tests due to the fact that several of the variables were highly skewed.

The Deservingness of Victims

The respondents’ ratings of the three types of livestock theft presented for evaluation were compared across the five factors of responsibility, seriousness, deservingness of the victim and the offender, and sympathy for the victim. Across the three examples, as predicted, the perceived deservingness of the victims was positively correlated with the victims’ perceived responsibility for the outcome and negatively correlated to the perceived seriousness of the crime and the degree of sympathy awarded to the victim (see Table 5). These findings support Feather’s conclusions³⁰ that perceived responsibility is clearly associated with perceptions of deservingness. It can be concluded that this rule applies to victims as well as offenders.

Insert Table 5 here

The findings suggest that the degree of seriousness of a crime influences judgments of the deservingness of victims. The perceived seriousness of the incident was positively

correlated with the degree of sympathy for the victim and with agreement on the appropriateness of the penalty awarded to the offender. Gottfredson and Hindelang³¹ and Skogan,³² note that the perceived seriousness of an offence is the strongest predictor of an offence being reported to police. The perceived deservingness of the victim was negatively correlated to the support for the penalty awarded to the offender.

Kendall tests of comparisons of the farmers' evaluations of the three scenarios found the professional theft was clearly rated as more serious ($\chi^2 = 422.89$, $p < 0.0001$), the victim was less responsible for the crime ($\chi^2 = 165.25$, $p < 0.0001$), and less deserving of losing his stock ($\chi^2 = 217.05$, $p < 0.0001$) and was awarded more sympathy ($\chi^2 = 315.87$, $p < 0.0001$). Figure 1 presents a comparison of the mean scores of the farmers' evaluations of each of the five factors across the three scenarios.

Insert Figure 1 here

The Deservingness of Offenders

Feather's model of ratings of the role of the offender in the scenarios was supported within the farmers' evaluations. The perceived seriousness of the offence was positively related to the offender's perceived responsibility for the offences and the deservingness of the penalty. The correlations in Table 6 show that there was a consistent pattern of relations between the farmers' evaluations across the two scenarios. Kendall tests of comparisons revealed that the offender in the neighbourhood

theft example was rated as more deserving of a penalty than the offender in the single animal theft ($\chi^2 = 9.59, p < 0.002$).

Insert Table 6 here

Comparison of Farmers' Ratings of the Two Versions of Each Theft

The farmers' ratings for each individual type of theft were then compared by the two versions of each scenario using Kruskal-Wallis tests for independent groups. No significant differences were found for the single animal theft and only one significant difference was evident for the neighbourhood theft. The male victim who had an off-farm job was seen as more deserving of victimisation than the woman operating the farm with her son ($\chi^2 = 5.52, p < 0.02$). However, for the remaining measures, respondents rated the neighbourhood theft no differently if the victim was a male or a female.

There were some highly significant results found for the farmers' evaluations of the professional theft scenarios (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here

There were no differences in respondents' ratings of the seriousness of this event. The majority of respondents (84%) described this crime as *Very Serious*. However, in the condition where the farmer was less responsible (not checking his stock often enough

and not securing the property), the victim was rated as being significantly more responsible for the crime ($\chi^2 = 47.36$, $p < 0.0001$) and more deserving of the outcome ($\chi^2 = 32.87$, $p < 0.0001$) and was awarded less sympathy ($\chi^2 = 25.6$, $p < 0.0001$). This finding again confirms Feather's findings³³ that perceptions of responsibility are strongly correlated with perceived deservingness.

Victim Blaming

The farmers' evaluations of the livestock theft scenarios were then compared against a measure of their tendency to blame victims or society in regard to livestock theft. In examining the data, variability in the responses to the scale items suggested that the analysis should provide for those respondents who were not clearly defined as either victim or society blamers. To do this, a hierarchical cluster analysis was performed on the combined responses to the victim blaming and society blaming scales in order to group respondents according to their similarity in their scores around the mean. The use of standardised scores permitted comparisons of diverse distributions within the analysis. Ward's minimum variance cluster analysis was employed with dissimilarities between scores defined by squared Euclidean distance.³⁴ Inspection of the dendrogram and scree plot resulting from the clustering procedure suggested the presence of three clusters.

Several variables were then analysed post hoc according to the cluster solution to provide a profile of the three groups of farmers. The group in Cluster 1 (n=177) were clearly Society Blamers. They were younger, more likely to be female, and more likely

to be have been victims of crime. Cluster 2 represented the Victim Blamers (n=178). They were a little older than Cluster 1 and there were slightly more males. This group were the least likely to have been victimised. Cluster 3 (n= 51) blamed everything and everybody. They were older (average age 62 years) and were more likely to be male. Comparisons between the clusters on how they evaluated the livestock theft scenarios revealed clear differences. Figure 3 displays the variances between the group's standardised mean ratings of the combined scores for the three types of livestock theft.

Insert Figure 3 here

Victim Blamers were significantly more likely than society blamers to rate victims as more responsible ($\chi^2 = 9.20$, $p < 0.01$) and more deserving of their misfortune ($\chi^2 = 11.74$, $p < 0.003$). They were significantly less likely to view the crimes as serious ($\chi^2 = 5.64$, $p < 0.05$) than Society Blamers.

Kruskal-Wallis tests for independent groups compared the way farmers within the clusters evaluated the individual livestock theft scenarios. The analyses revealed that victim blamers rated the victim of the professional theft as significantly more deserving of his fate ($\chi^2 = 7.52$, $p < 0.02$). Victim blamers also rated the neighbourhood theft as significantly less serious ($\chi^2 = 6.87$, $p < 0.03$), the victim as significantly more responsible ($\chi^2 = 8.27$, $p < 0.02$) and more deserving of the crime ($\chi^2 = 8.66$, $p < 0.01$) and they were less sympathetic towards the victim ($\chi^2 = 8.29$, $p < 0.02$). For the single animal theft, victim blamers believed the victim was significantly more deserving of losing his stock ($\chi^2 = 6.67$, $p < 0.04$).

DISCUSSION

This study has revealed clear evidence that differential attitudes regarding the responsibility and the deservingness of victims of livestock theft prevail in rural communities. The findings suggest that persistence of such attitudes may facilitate the commission of crime and may preclude the reporting of crimes to police. This has implications for policy and emphasises the difficulties police must experience in investigating stock thefts.

The focus of this research was based upon one specific type of crime that occurs within the context of rural communities. It cannot be assumed that the processes underlying people's reactions to livestock theft can be generalised to other types of crime. However, there is some evidence that the same cultural ideology and social judgments within rural communities may be extended to other locales, as well as to other crimes, such as alcohol-related offences and sexual assault. The foundation of our argument is that the very cohesiveness and integration of some communities creates a structure that tolerates or refuses to recognise deviance of residents who are considered to be normal. For example, the tolerance and closed ranks in urban ethnic communities regarding some forms of crime provide another reflection of *Gemeinschaft*. This was the key notion of Cultural Conflict Theory³⁵ upon which Sykes and Matza drew their formalisation of *Techniques of Neutralisation*.³⁶

Rural Australians often tolerate and encourage excessive alcohol consumption at social events as an expression of community solidarity. As a consequence, rural areas

experience high rates of social disorder that are linked to alcohol abuse.³⁷ In spite of these dire consequences, rural residents draw upon the gamut of neutralisation techniques to tolerate the problem.

It is the phenomenon of victim blaming that leads to victims' experiencing feelings of guilt and self-doubt which perpetuates a cultural tolerance of sexual violence and results in sexual assault being a significantly under-reported crime. Victim blaming tendencies may encourage offenders to rape as well as influence perceptions of rape within the criminal justice system.^{38, 39} In the severest sense, victim blaming can impact upon crimes as serious as homicide. One striking and well-known example concerns the assault, rape and murder in 1989 of a 14-year old girl named Leigh Leigh at a beach party at Stockton, a small community north of Sydney.⁴⁰ Although there were several youths believed to be involved, only one was sentenced to a minimum 14 years' imprisonment for murder and not without considerable opposition and lack of cooperation by a community that closed ranks to protect their local lads. No one has ever been convicted of the rapes. The culture within this community, which hid and therefore condoned the rituals of sexual intimidation, led to the blaming of the victim and her parents. The behaviour of the boys was considered to be acceptable, not only by those who attended the party, but by the authorities who later investigated it and ultimately, the media. Doubts were cast about the victim's virginity and her general behaviour, with suggestions that it was basically her fault, in that she had drunk too much. The widespread acceptance of these beliefs transformed the rape-murder scenario into 'she got what she deserved'.⁴¹

These findings have significant implications for the effective policing of crime and for the implementation of crime prevention programs generally within small communities. Previous studies by the authors⁴² revealed that rural police officers recognise that rural places have unique problems, values, beliefs and norms that influence the types of crimes that are committed and the ways the community responds to them. Police officers also adhered to their own informal norms when practicing discretion in their investigations of farm crime. Rural police understand that they must accommodate local norms to some extent in order to be accepted in the community and to be an effective officer. They are likely to turn a blind eye to some violations related to alcohol, such as drunken driving and public drunkenness, in order to maintain both social and working relationships within the community.⁴³ However, Reiner, cited in Chan⁴⁴ suggests that police discretion and their informal working rules can subvert or obstruct policing reforms. Rural police training would be improved by including some discussion of these issues to ensure all officers are aware of the social processes that operate in rural communities. Officers need to be aware of possible biases in the judgments of local people they interview in the course of investigations. Officers will also need to be aware of their own tendencies to use heuristics when making assessments of people. Finally, police should recognise that they may induce some ill-feeling and a lack of cooperation from the community if they prosecute a well-liked person within the community.

Additional studies on the relationship between crime and deservingness can bring to light a whole series of patterns mostly ignored by criminology, but with wide-ranging implications for criminal justice systems. For example, what witnesses report to the

police is influenced by their perceptions of the situation, including how they view both victims and offenders. Studies incorporating the concept of deservingness can identify patterns that will assist the police as they interview witnesses, and improve crime prevention programs that seek to encourage citizens to report all crime to the police, and accurately. Media reporting of crime not only influences the public's perceptions of crime, but can even play a role in the outcome of investigations, trials, and other criminal justice processes. How do the media portray both victims and offenders in crime reporting, and, in turn, how do media portrayals influence perceptions of crime situations?

Perhaps the most fruitful inquiry for the concept of deservingness is the set of issues related to the complex system of relationships between the victim, the offender, witnesses, the police and other parts of the criminal justice systems, and how this system is influenced by such factors as the age, sex, ethnicity, and social class of the actors involved. In other words, we know that these factors make a difference, but we do not know how they influence perceptions of crime and differential definitions of justice. How these issues are expressed are representations of the structure of relationships found within rural communities. Inevitably, the way crime is viewed: by offenders, the community at large, the media, the police and other parts of the criminal justice system, is a matter of how justice is perceived, and this study clearly points to the heuristic nature of the concept of deservingness in that regard. Another area that merits investigation is community structure. This study has indicated that some communities exhibit the dark side of *Gemeinschaft* more than others. Understanding the characteristics that allow many communities to encapsulate the law-abiding qualities

of social cohesion, and as well, understanding the characteristics of other communities that enable criminal behaviour would contribute much to the formation of effective law enforcement and policy.

It is therefore vitally important to conduct further research to explore this social phenomenon, covering a range of different crimes amongst a variety of different social structures to seek a greater clarity in understanding the way in which these social processes work. Further research across communities of various sizes, and within particular neighbourhoods, groups and subcultures, may find other specific expressions of how factors of social organisation and social control contribute to crime. Such research may confirm the findings of the present study, that indeed cohesion and integration rather than social disorganisation may be the primary sources of deviance.

Conclusion

This study has extended Feather's^{45,46} research on the way people rate the deservingness of a penalty awarded to an offender for an offence, to include judgments of the victim's role in the event. The study found that values of victim blaming were predictive of the perceived deservingness of victims. However, the study also found that the victim's responsibility and conformity to role expectations were the most important considerations in people's moral judgments of the outcome of a criminal event. While subjects conformed to Feather's model that perceived responsibility is linked to perceived deservingness, the degree of these ratings varied according to the type of theft and the values respondents held. Values are therefore important considerations for

understanding the ways people react to crime within their communities. Future research across a wide range of criminological issues would benefit by considering the effect of values within the study design.

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Table 1: Per cent of reported property crime over the previous two year period.

| Theft of: | Victimisation (%) | Other Property Crimes: | Victimisation (%) |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Tools and small equipment | 33 | Illegal trespassers | 30 |
| Fuel | 21 | Illegal shooters | 25 |
| Livestock | 23 | Break and enter | 14 |
| Fencing Materials | 9 | Dumping of rubbish | 11 |
| Machinery | 6 | Vandalism | 13 |
| Wool | 5 | Fraud | 6 |
| Timber | 4 | Growing of cannabis or other drug | |
| Farm chemicals | 2 | production | 6 |
| Seed or grain | 2 | Arson | 2 |
| Other (e.g. theft of fruit from orchards) | 4 | | |

Table 2: Respondent's reasons for not reporting crime (n=393).

| <u>Reason for not reporting</u> | <u>(%)</u> |
|--|-------------------|
| Too difficult to prove | 56 |
| Difficult to tell if a crime had occurred | 53 |
| Too much time had passed | 52 |
| Waste of time reporting - police can't do much | 43 |
| Would not want the hassles of the legal process | 31 |
| Living in a small community, there would be problems reporting a suspect in the district | 28 |
| Police have no knowledge or understanding about farming | 23 |
| Would not want the media getting hold of the story | 17 |
| Rather deal with the problem myself | 14 |

Table 3: Evaluation scale.

1. Do you consider this event to be a serious crime?

It's not serious at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *It's very serious*

2. Where do you think the responsibility lies for the loss of stock?

The victim 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *The offender*

3. How would you rate the extent to which the victim deserved to lose his stock?

Doesn't deserve it at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Deserves it a lot*

4. How sympathetic do you feel towards the victim?

Not sympathetic at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Very sympathetic*

5. How would you rate the extent to which the offender deserved to be charged with theft?

Doesn't deserve it at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 *Deserves it a lot*

Table 4: Victim/Society Blaming Scale.

Victim Blaming

Farmers are victims of crime because:

- they don't take sufficient responsibility for safety and security on their farm.
- they have poor farm management practices.
- they have off-farm work or leave their properties unattended for long periods of time.
- they are 'Pitt Street' farmers or corporate organisations who can afford the loss.
- they are hobby or weekend farmers.

Society Blaming

- the government is not sufficiently concerned about farm crime.
- crime is just a fact of life.
- the police are unwilling or unable to do anything about farm crime.
- there are increasing numbers of strangers moving to, or passing through rural communities.
- there is high unemployment in the country.

Table 5: Correlations between farmers' evaluations of victims.

| Farmers' Evaluations | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. Victims deserved outcome | - | 0.4078 | -0.3475 | -0.4279 | -0.3322 |
| 2. Victims' responsibility | 0.4078 | - | -0.4038 | -0.3773 | -0.4221 |
| 3. Seriousness of offence | -0.3475 | -0.4038 | - | 0.4779 | 0.4825 |
| 4. Sympathy for victims | -0.4279 | -0.3773 | 0.4779 | - | 0.3419 |
| 5. Offender deserved penalty | -0.3322 | -0.4221 | 0.4825 | 0.3419 | - |

All correlations were significant at the $p < 0.0001$ level (two tailed tests).

Table 6: Correlations between farmers' evaluations of offenders.

| Farmers' Evaluations | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Neighbourhood Theft | | | |
| 1. Seriousness of offence | - | 0.4783 | 0.5148 |
| 2. Offender's responsibility | 0.4783 | - | 0.5358 |
| 3. Offender deserved penalty | 0.5148 | 0.5358 | - |
| Single Animal Theft | | | |
| 1. Seriousness of offence | - | 0.4988 | 0.4509 |
| 2. Offender's Responsibility | 0.4988 | - | 0.4088 |
| 3. Offender Deserved Penalty | 0.4509 | 0.4088 | - |

All correlations were significant at the $p < 0.0001$ level (two tailed tests).

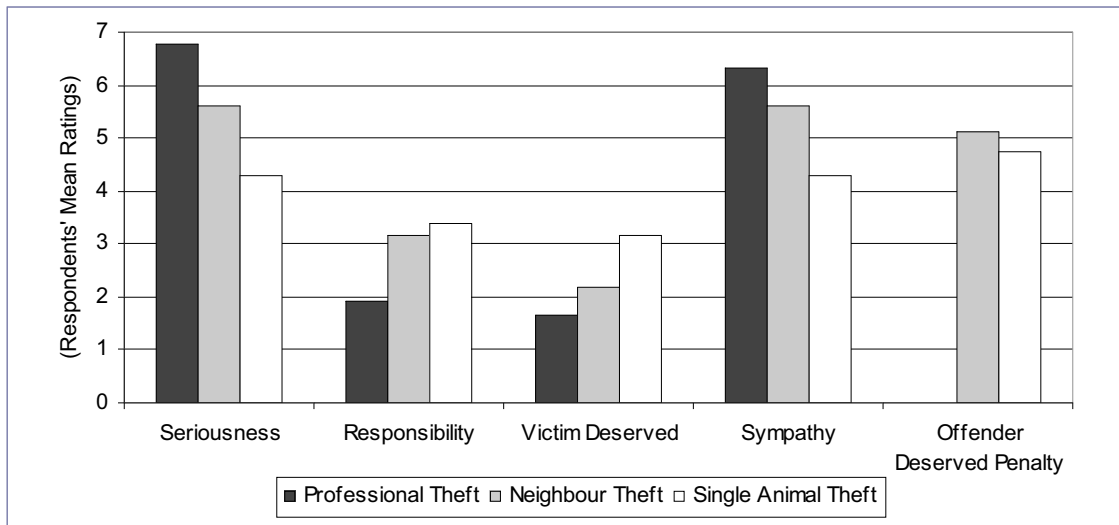


Figure 1: Farmers' mean ratings across the three livestock theft examples.

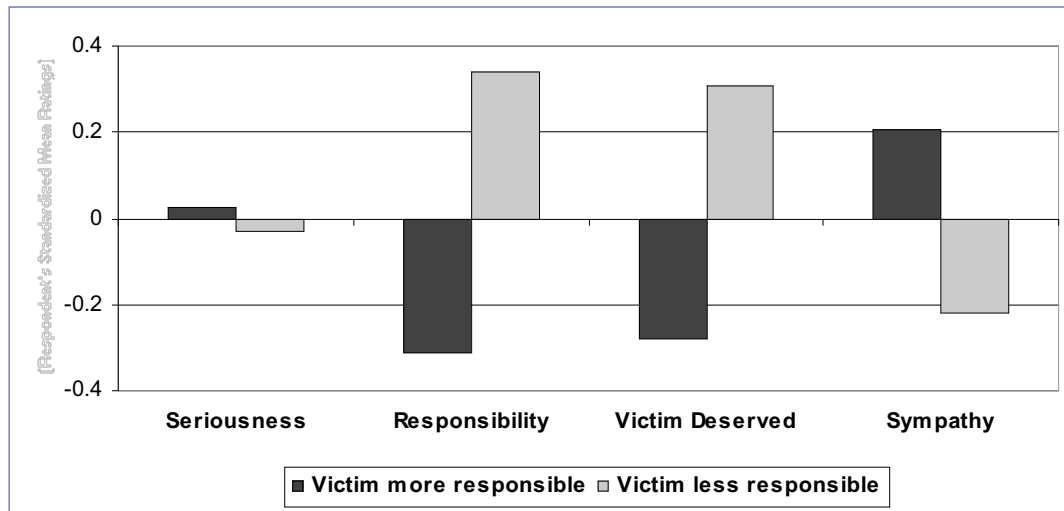


Figure 2: Respondent's mean standardized ratings for the two types of professional theft.

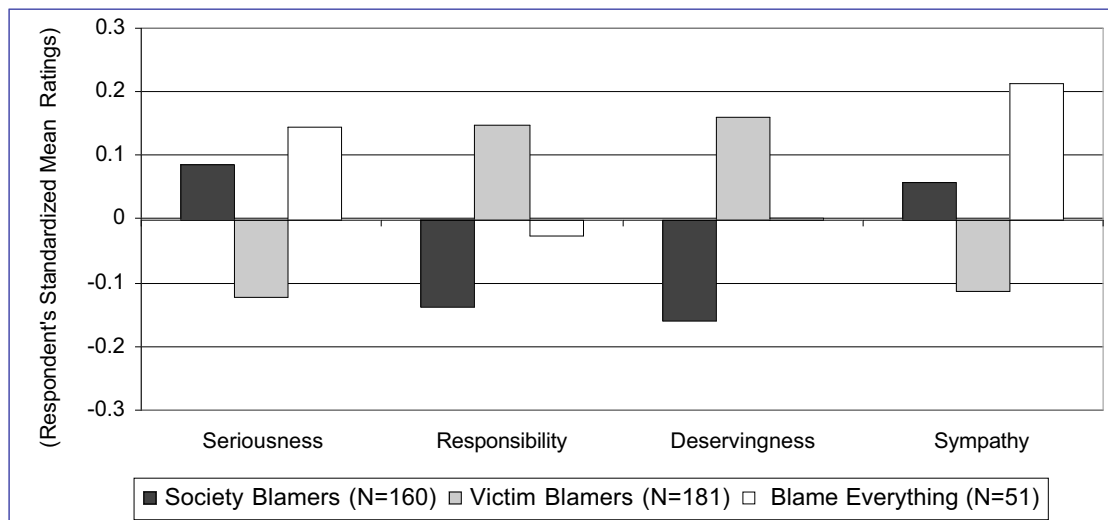


Figure 3: Combined mean standardized ratings across the three types of blame.

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *Crime Prevention and Community Safety: An International Journal*.

The definitive publisher-authenticated version –
 Barclay, E; Donnermeyer, JF; Jobes, PC; ‘The Dark Side of Gemeinschaft:
 Criminality within Rural Communities’, published in
Crime Prevention and Community Safety, 2004/08/01, volume 6, issue 3,
 pgs 7-22, published by Palgrave Macmillan –
 is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpcs.8140191>