

Family Farm Members' Stress and Coping Experiences

Research Brief

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Farm Stress
Brief Series



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Synopsis: This brief describes research that sought to understand how farm families use coping strategies to deal with recurring stressors. Respondents participated in in-depth interviews in which they identified stressors and talked about how they coped with the stress. A pattern of reframing emerged across the responses, as they looked at the positive aspects of working with family, being in nature, and their farmer identity.

Introduction

Farming, for most, is a way of life, not just an occupation. Many farms spanning the United States of America are family-owned and operated and have been within the same family for multiple generations (USDA, 2024). Even though the heart of family farming is thriving, they face alarming stress levels due to shifting environmental conditions and increased financial pressure. Economic fluctuations, natural disasters, tough weather conditions, and working with family members increase stress. However, despite the recurring stress, these family farms persist. This study explored stressors family farm members experience and how they are currently coping with the recurring stress.

Background

Considering that 96 percent of farms in the United States are family-owned and operated, family farms are the backbone of American agriculture (USDA, 2024). However, the number of family farms has drastically decreased due to the

economy's fluctuation over the past several decades (Wedell et al., 2020), devastating losses from natural disasters and droughts (Robertson et al., 2022), and other problems out of farmers' control. The operational side of a farm has evolved with the use of precision agriculture and advances in equipment. Despite such advancements, family farms are still struggling to generate a profit or break even because of the increased farm expenses (USDA, 2024). These factors contribute to the stress these family members experience daily. Yet, despite these hardships, many family farms work hard to keep their family farm alive.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were: (1) identify stressful aspects of family farming and (2) assess how family farm members cope with stress.

Theoretical Framework

The project was guided by Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress and Coping Theory focuses on what elements contribute to stress in people's

lives and how people cope with that stress. How individuals appraise events can cause stress if they believe they do not have the resources to handle the situation and are unsure how to navigate the situation. In response, people adopt coping strategies that help lower stress. Stress and Coping Theory focuses on three types of coping: problem-focused, which focuses on solving the problem; emotion-focused, in which individuals try to manage or reduce the emotions experienced; and finally, avoidance-focused, where individuals avoid the stressor. These coping types focus on short-term stressors, whereas family farm members face recurrent stressors that may require alternative coping strategies.

Sample & Methodology

Participants were recruited via network sampling in two ways. First, we contacted Extension agents and College of Agriculture personnel to share information about this study via email listservs. Second, we posted flyers at local feed stores and cooperatives, around the university campus, and on agriculture-related social media pages (e.g., local and national cattlemen's associations).

Data collection occurred through one on one, in-depth interviews. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences and recalled discussions about stressors and how they managed their personal stress (e.g., What challenges do you hear farmers talking about? What are your reactions to these conversations?). A total of 25 family farm members were interviewed for this project. Interviews took place via Zoom between September 2020 and September 2021, lasting between 33 and 99 minutes ($M = 55$ minutes). Demographic information was collected via post-surveys. We did not collect location data from participants to maintain participant anonymity. Out of the 22 participants who self-selected to participate in the follow-up demographic survey, 13 were female, 12 were full or partial owner/operators of the farm, and

most came from livestock operations ($n = 16$). Interviews were transcribed and coded, resulting in two emerging themes related to stressors and coping techniques. Data were coded using constant comparative coding to identify emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

Stressors

Based on the interviews with family farmer members, the vast majority emphasized environmental and financial stressors, which aligns with other farm stress research (Cuthbertson et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2022). Participants shared that many of their stressors stem from the unpredictability of the market and not receiving adequate financial gains despite having plentiful assets. Additionally, farmers mentioned the reality of their occupation being weather-dependent and the hardships associated with raising livestock.

Environmental concerns were also a common stressor for participants. The unpredictability of weather led many farmers to constantly stress about their crops and ability to farm. One participant described farming as gambling, where you are "kind of betting on there to be good weather this year." Other participants noted their stress with environmental concerns stemmed from not being in control and instead being at "the mercy of the weather, and you're at the mercy of the animals and issues they may have."

When participants talked about financial stress, they focused on the unpredictable nature of farming and never being sure of income. One participant shared: "One of the biggest things is just, the market isn't what it used to be...You have to have a lot of cattle to necessarily live completely off selling cattle. If you have one bad year, that could cripple your whole farm." The constant uncertainty of market prices was described as a "dartboard" and was a point of stress.

Both financial and environmental stressors were recurrent points of stress rather than short-term stress. Recurrent stress is stress generated from repetitive events that are outside of an individual's ability to control. This type of stress is one individuals must manage, rather than completely resolve. For these participants, recurrent stress stemmed from the unpredictability of and inability to control the environment or financial markets. As a result, the coping processes they utilized differed from current definitions within Stress and Coping Theory.

Coping

When discussing how they cope with these stressors, participants did not focus on directly addressing the stressors, as Stress and Coping Theory would predict. Instead, their coping processes focused on what was positive within their family farm experience in spite of the stress. We defined this as reframing, where participants focused on the many benefits of being a part of a family farm despite the recurrent stress. Family farm members reframed in three ways: reframing to the family, reframing to nature, and reframing to the farmer identity.

Reframing to the family focused attention on the benefits of being with family and continuing a family legacy. Participants who reframed to family talked about raising their children on the farm and being able to pass on the farm one day. Other participants focused on the legacy they were continuing as a multigenerational family farm. All participants who reframed to family coped with the stress by emphasizing the benefits of working with family members. One participant summarized it this way:

"All that glitters isn't gold. Look at the long term, you could sell your dirt, make some money. But they're not making any more dirt and being a family farmer, the rewards don't come in form of a paycheck. I think if you look at what the ancillary

benefits are, raising children and just becoming a better person, I think that's kind of the advice I would give. In the short term, you can make some money. Go chase the money and be a money grabber, but it's not all about money...you can't take it with you."

When reframing to nature, the participants discussed the opportunity to connect with nature and the therapeutic role nature can play. Even though participants noted the environment was a primary cause of stress, many participants also recognized the benefits being in nature can provide. Some participants talked about seeing crops and animals grow, and how it was "soothing to be back a part of that natural life cycle." One participant shared a calming part of nature that helped them cope:

"I enjoy being around the animals. And it's therapeutic for me to be out on a tractor; your mind can rest. When you're out and especially on a tractor, there's such a thing as tractor therapy, there really is."

Finally, participants reframed to the farmer identity by focusing on the pride they held in being a farmer. This reframing helped farmers focus on the pride in their work and an acceptance of the stress associated with farming in order to enjoy the benefits of farming. Some of these stories focused on the passion they have for agriculture, like this quote:

"The grass isn't greener on the other side. I left this community. And it sucked, you know, I hated living in a city. Recognize that there is a struggle to live in this lifestyle, but it's worth it in the end because you know if you want to get back into it, it is so hard to."

Conclusions

This qualitative study explored family farm member stress and coping strategies. As expected, participants' stress stemmed from environmental and financial issues that are outside of their ability to control. As a result, coping strategies focused on reframing the stress to the more positive aspects of farming. This reframing helped participants focus on the benefits of farming and may help them manage the stress in more productive ways. Based on these results, we offer the following suggestions for extension agents and other agribusiness representatives to better serve family farm members.

First, active listening is important. If family farm members are talking about the stressful characteristics in a positive light, it may be difficult to identify whether farmers are stressed or not. Second, including more coping skills within existing programming can help educate farmers on how to manage their stress. Preventive measures can be taken by implementing coping skills material in youth-led organizations, like 4-H and FFA, to teach the younger generation how to combat recurring stressors.

To read more about the project, the full article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2023.2218893> or by contacting Emily A. Paskewitz (epaskewi@utk.edu).

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This work is supported by the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network, project award no. 2020-70028-327, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy; the research described in this brief was funded through the UT College of Communication and Information's Dean's Summer Research Fund.

W 1301 10/24 Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.