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# Counseling Iowan Farmers: A Phenomenological Study of Clinical Perspectives

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Rural communities present unique challenges for counselors. Farmers experience high rates of suicidality, depression, and substance abuse and are less likely to seek mental health help due to associated stigma, financial strain, time constraints, and lack of specialized training among clinicians. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of counselors in rural Iowa who counsel male farmers. Participants completed a 60-minute semi-structured interview and demographics questionnaire. Hermeneutic phenomenology and the ecological perspective were used to identify and interpret these experiences, illuminating the need for culturally competent, contextually responsive counseling practices in rural settings. Essential themes were categorized within the ecological levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. We discuss our findings, their implications, and offer recommendations for further study.

**Keywords**: *rural counseling, farmers' mental health, ecological perspective, hermeneutic phenomenology, Iowa, farmers*

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## Introduction

Rural communities, or communities geographically located outside of urban areas populated by 50,000 or more people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), are unique and require cultural understanding. Unlike urban environments, rural communities lack access to basic health care, including routine and preventative medical and mental health care, despite the poorer overall health of the population. They also have increased rates of poverty and limited access to transportation and broadband internet (Crumb et al., 2020). Mental health disorders are prevalent and persistent (Crumb et al., 2020), and rural and urban communities experience equivalent rates of mood disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, trauma, anxiety disorders, developmental disorders, and psychotic disorders (Logstein, 2016). Moreover, farmers and those working in the agriculture industry experience high rates of suicidality, depression, and substance abuse (Beautrais, 2018; Bossard et al., 2016; Ellis & Albrecht, 2017; Garnham & Bryant, 2014). Increases in technology, such as telemental health,

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have expanded opportunities for access, yet problems accessing broadband internet and connectivity remain in most rural and remote areas. Further, the stigma associated with seeking help for issues relative to mental health prevents some of those in need from contacting a mental health professional (Crumb et al., 2019; Larson & Corrigan, 2010).

Those within the agricultural industry operate in unique rural sub-cultures (Bondy & Cole, 2019), which include common language and value sets. Further, farmers are less likely to seek mental health help due to associated stigma, financial strain, time constraints, and lack of specialized training among clinicians. In addition, farmers are unlikely to seek services for themselves; their wives and children are more likely to seek help (Bondy & Cole, 2019). Those who do attempt to seek services face challenges specific to rural communities including transportation and a lack of providers, which leads to reliance on other community members and programs, such as religious leaders (Cole & Bondy, 2020) and/or primary care physicians (Imig, 2014; Robinson et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2018).

To be successful, clinicians must be reflective of their own identity and biases; be willing to acknowledge and accept differences; and actively seek to understand the values and cultural competency associated with rural communities that can promote successful outcomes for clients. Due to values grounded in self-sufficiency and confidentiality, for example, rural community members are less likely to trust those outside their micro-level relationships (Johnson & Mahan, 2020). Thus, some have suggested that a collaborative approach to treatment in rural environments could increase trust and support help-seeking behavior (Robinson et al., 2012).

Additionally, understanding culture in rural communities includes an increased understanding of the *agrarian imperative*, where agricultural workers, including farmers, commonly value the land as the most meaningful part of their identity (Rosman, 2010). This belief system impels agricultural workers to accept pain and hardship as necessary to generational legacy and the understanding that failure or loss of land equates to shame and results in chronic stress, isolation, and suicidality (Rosman, 2010).

An identity grounded in agriculture can also contribute to traditional male hegemony, saturated with emphasis on physical prowess, masculinity, financial success, and pride, which is threatened by the economy, climate change (Bondy & Cole, 2019; Howard et al., 2020), and changes in regulations and legislation (Bondy & Cole, 2019). Issues relative to this primary identity can impact rates of depression and suicide, which have increased in recent years—especially among men in the agriculture industry—and are exacerbated by readily accessible firearms (Beautrais, 2018; Bossard et al., 2016; Ellis & Albrecht, 2017; Garnham & Bryant, 2014). Due to the stigma associated with an outdated ideology equating mental health and weakness, as well as a lack of resources, many agricultural workers remain isolated (Crumb et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2012).

## Clinical Practice in Rural Communities

Though counselors report advantages of working in rural communities as experiencing a sense of community, a slower pace of living, an attraction to nature, similar cultural values and beliefs, existing attachments, and financial benefits (Gillespie & Redivo, 2012; Hastings & Cohn, 2013; McNichols et al., 2016; Oetinger et al., 2014), disadvantages include a lack of resources and training (Fifield & Oliver, 2016), isolation, establishing ethical boundaries, increased risk of burnout, and cultural issues (Hasting & Cohn, 2013). There are also issues with access to telehealth in rural communities due to the lack of broadband and connectivity, including fewer cell towers, making counseling via the telephone difficult (Johnson & Mahan, 2020; Mackie, 2015). In addition, increased access to urban providers via telemental health retains common issues, including a lack of cultural awareness and training for the rural communities they might serve and a lack of trust from rural community members for those outside of their micro- and macro-systems (Bowen & Caron, 2016; Bray, 2016; Imig, 2014).

The literature has suggested that a collaborative approach to treatment in rural environments could increase trust, as well as support help-seeking behavior (Gerlach et al., 2018; Riding-Malon & Werth, 2014; Nichols et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2012), thus emphasizing the need for appropriate and responsive counseling modalities specific to the culture of rural communities. Clinicians must understand the culture of rural environments, and researchers have even recommended that clinicians obtain specialized cultural training to provide appropriate treatment modalities (Bowen & Caron, 2016; Bray, 2016; Carrera et al., 2020). Despite this recommendation and the need for understanding, clinicians have a difficult time accessing training that is specific to rural communities, and a shortage of qualified providers leads to limited consultation with colleagues or meaningful supervision (Bray, 2016; Wilson et al., 2018). To increase support for rural communities, an increase in qualified community counselors is necessary.

Rural counselors must have a broad range of skills in order to provide effective services (Hasting et al., 2013; Johansson et al., 2019; Paulson, 2015; Weaver et al., 2015). The rural setting demands that counselors are good, generalized practitioners, especially when clients do not have access to specialists (Hasting & Cohn, 2013; Johansson et al., 2019; Paulson, et al., 2015; Weaver et al., 2015). Working from a generalist perspective requires counselors to have extensive knowledge of diverse mental health issues and treatment interventions, as well as being flexible and adaptive. Generalized practitioners may find themselves in the role of counselor, case manager, crisis intervention worker, and advocate.

Considering the multifaceted roles counselors must fill in the rural community (Wilson et al., 2018), as well as the emphasis on the environment in agriculture (Bondy & Cole, 2019), counselors must examine best practices in treatment through an ecological context. Despite the research findings, literature and current practices do not represent the needs of rural communities; therefore, counselors are unaware and unsure of how to best treat this population. A study designed to explore the perspectives of counselors to better understand current treatment practices and to inform best practices through an ecological lens was needed. Thus, we developed this study to explore the lived experiences of professional counselors in Iowa who specialize in the treatment of male farmers.

## Ecological Perspective

The ecological perspective in counseling, evolved from Bronfenbrenner (1977), focuses on understanding human engagement and behavior as interactive, meaningful, situational, and contextual (Bridges, 2013; Cook, 2012). Ecological counselors assume that behavior and meaning making are influenced by myriad interactions within multiple environmental subsystems throughout the lifespan and within the proximal and distal contexts in which people live (Bridges, 2013; Cook, 2012; Rogers et al., 2018). These environmental subsystems were conceptualized by Bronfennbrenner (1977) as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Cook (2012) described these as interactions on an individual level in close personal relationships, as part of social group membership and within an organization, in communities in relation to geographic location, as part of institutional or systemic group membership such as education, and as part of overarching regulatory sociocultural practices (Bridges, 2013). These systems thus represent overlapping, concentric circles in which humans live and interact.

## Ecological Perspective and Rural Counseling

Based on the ecological perspective, the circles in rural counseling include intrapersonal/individual factors, interpersonal factors, community factors, and public policy factors. Individual factors, such as knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and personality, influence behavior (Cook, 2012). Interpersonal factors, such as interactions with other people, can provide social support or create barriers to interpersonal growth. Institutional and organizational factors, including the rules, regulations, policies, and informal structures, shape counselor development and practice (Cook, 2012). Community factors, such as formal or informal social norms, exist among individuals, groups, or organizations. Finally, public policy factors include local, state, and federal

policies and laws (Cook, 2012) by which counselors are required to abide. Many people within rural and agricultural communities function within this social–ecological framework (Bondy & Cole, 2019; Wilson et al., 2018). For example, farmers are often faced with the need to be resilient amidst everchanging environmental stressors that require the need to overcome adversity, such as climate change, which has been shown to influence both business and levels of anxiety relative to profitability (Howard et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative for counselors, who provide counseling services in rural America, to gain competencies and understanding of the farming communities and the ways in which their environment affects their lived experiences. For example, counselors can engage in continuing education through universities that focus on agriculture, as well as the Department of Agriculture for individual states in which they practice.

## Methods

Congruent with the purpose of the study, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to explore and interpret the experiences of the participants. Hermeneutics, or interpretive phenomenology, as a research design, allows the researcher to be part of the meaning-making process without bracketing personal understanding of phenomena (van Manen, 2014). As a methodological design, hermeneutics emphasizes the role of language and meaning in consideration of historical and cultural contexts (van Manen, 2014). Further, the hermeneutic circle is intrinsic to the researcher and reflection, as well as understanding the phenomenon in part relative to the whole (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; van Manen, 2014). As such, it was important that each researcher recognize their positionality. Both researchers are experts in qualitative research, have experience conducting and publishing qualitative studies in peer-reviewed journals, and have taught qualitative methods in master and/or doctoral CACREP-accredited counseling programs. In addition, both researchers are licensed counselors with experience living in and/or counseling in rural communities.

Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological studies, we had two frameworks for this study, phenomenology and the ecological perspective. The first, phenomenology, grounded in the philosophical underpinnings of Heidegger (1962), required us to make explicit our pre-understanding of the phenomenon, including our roles as counselor and researcher. Rather than bracketing preconceived notions, we engaged in the hermeneutic circle to revise previous interpretations and knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation. Data analysis, in hermeneutic phenomenology, is an iterative process that focuses on identifying emergent themes and meaning (Peoples, 2021). Therefore, we used the ecological perspective as a lens to analyze and organize the data. In doing so, we were able to interpret the data and increase understanding through emergent themes.

An ecological counselor seeks training to understand the need for resiliency and views the client through a framework that allows for a broad assessment of a client's intrapsychic sphere, ecological niche, and interactional sphere (Wilson, 2004). In other words, the counselor assesses the client's interactions and repeating patterns throughout their ecological system (Wilson, 2004). Through an ecological lens, the counselor takes a collaborative approach to treatment, often encouraging the client to co-construct meaning and to provide detailed and in-depth descriptions of personal strengths and presenting problems (Wilson, 2004). Moreover, the ecological counselor is aware of language, cultural contexts, gender identity, diversity, and strengths and limitations of the environment (Wilson, 2004). Because of the applicability and importance of this approach to working with rural communities using an ecological lens, we sought to answer the primary question: What are the lived experiences of Iowan counselors who specialize in the treatment of rural male farmers?

### Data Collection

After receiving approval from the institutional review board, the primary investigator (PI) began recruiting Iowan counselors who were identified through the state licensing directory. Potential participants were sent an email invitation with a description of the purpose of the study and an informed consent form. Once

consent was given, the PI responded to participants to schedule interviews. Participants were scheduled for one 60-minute, semi-structured interview and were sent a demographic questionnaire (see Table 1) to complete prior to the interview. The interview consisted of an introduction and review of the informed consent, a reminder of the purpose of the study, and semi-structured questions. Following each interview, the PI used memos to record thoughts, reflections, and observations. These memos allowed for reflexivity of researcher positionality as well as any potential bias.

**Table 1:** *Participant Demographics*

| Age | Gender | Practice Setting | Years Licensed |
|---|---|---|---|
| 38 | Female | Non-Profit | 7 |
| 53 | Female | Private Practice | 13 |
| 57 | Female | Private Practice | 23 |
| 37 | Male | Community Mental Health | 6 |
| 37 | Female | Community Mental Health | 10 |
| 64 | Female | Private Practice | 20 |
| 33 | Female | Community Mental Health | 9 |
| 63 | Female | Community Mental Health | 17 |

## Data Analysis

After eight interviews, saturation was achieved and no new information was presented. Therefore the researchers stopped collecting data, and each interview was manually transcribed, reviewed, and de-identified. Both researchers independently followed van Manen's (2014) thematic analysis process, which is a process of uncovering a theme or themes that are seen throughout the text and offer meaning and descriptions of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). Congruent with van Manen's approach and grounded in the principles of the hermeneutic circle, we followed the selective (or highlighting) approach, which directs researchers to read and immerse themselves in the text several times and consider which statements or phrases within the data are essential or revealing about the phenomenon described by the participants.

We identified emergent themes by removing appropriate phrases and statements from the transcription, which revealed phenomenologically sensitive results (van Manen, 2014). To increase trustworthiness, we used investigator triangulation and shared hermeneutic conversations to interpret the significance of the preliminary themes in the context of the original research question. During these conversations, we applied the ecological perspective in counseling as a lens to identify and organize essential themes. Moreover, the PI engaged in member checking using 30-minute follow-up interviews to ensure the participant's lived experiences were accurately represented. The essential themes were then categorized according to the ecological levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Cook, 2012).

### Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, the primary investigator collected data until data was saturated and no new themes emerged (Patton, 2015). Reflexive journaling was used following participant interviews. Additionally, we were transparent about the process followed within the study, applying a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, the goal is not to generalize to the broader population, rather researchers focus on transferability for social change. Specifically, researchers use the findings to increase the counselors' knowledge and competence of rural and farming cultures to provide best practices in treatment.

Dependability relates to the stability of data (Patton, 2015). To ensure the dependability of this study, the primary investigator relied on a renowned expert in hermeneutic design to guide the study from beginning to end. Additionally, we ensured that the data collected answered the research question.

Confirmability is the ability to ensure that the researcher's thoughts and biases are not driving the research and that the information is clearly provided by the experiences of the participants (Patton, 2015). To establish confirmability, the PI practiced reflexivity through memos and reflexive journaling. Additionally, we practiced dialogic engagement, and the PI conducted member checking.

## Results

Nine themes emerged related to participant experiences counseling farmers. These themes were explained through the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and each of the environmental subsystems (see Table 2):

- Microsystem: Three themes were identified within the microsystem (or the innermost circle as the immediate setting), which contains the individual and interpersonal factors of (a) farmer identity, (b) farmer coping skills, and (c) suicidality.
- Mesosystem: Within the mesosystem (the connection and processes between two or more microsystems), two themes were identified: (a) addictions and (b) family and couples counseling.
- Exosystem: Within the exosystem (the linkage between two or more subsystems), four themes were identified: (a) stress and mental illness related to farming, (b) physical distance and office hours, (c) insurance and financial means, and (d) help seeking.
- Macrosystem: The social blueprint that continues ideologies and organization of a particular culture or subculture within the exosystem. Two themes were identified: (a) stigma and (b) counselor education and training.

**Table 2:** *Essential Themes That Support Experiences Within Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Environmental Subsystems*

| Subsystem | Theme |
|---|---|
| Microsystem | |
| | Farmer identity |
| | Farmer coping skills |
| | Suicidality |
| Mesosystem | |
| | Addiction |
| | Family and couples counseling |
| Exosystem | |
| | Stress and mental illness related to farming |
| | Physical distance and office hours |
| | Help-seeking |
| Macrosystem | |
| | Stigma |
| | Counselor education training |

## Ecological Level: The Microsystem

The microsystem (or the innermost circle) is the immediate setting, which contains the individual and interpersonal factors (Cook, 2012). At this level, the relevant themes included farmer identity, farmer coping skills and addiction, and suicidality.

### Theme 1: Farmer Identity

All the participants endorsed limited experiences with farmers. Additionally, all participants described "farmer identity" as one that endorses self-reliance—a primary reason for their limited professional experience. Within participant descriptions, farmers were also described as stoic, carrying the burdens, stressors, and responsibilities of their families and work. Lori shared, "Unfortunately, my experiences are limited. I think that's kind of indicative of what goes on with our Iowan farmers." Sue similarly said, "I don't have a whole lot of experience counseling them. I have seen one or two male farmers." Another counselor Tina added:

> They [the farmers] isolate. They are their own boss. I think the trouble, in part, is that they live in their office. It's very difficult for them to differentiate between personal time and work time. I kind of think they only come in the house when they are exhausted or starving. They have difficulty putting up boundaries and then everything falls on their shoulders. If something goes wrong, "I need to solve it." They don't think a whole panel of people will help them with their concerns. They can figure this stuff out themselves.

Self-sufficiency and self-determination are the foundation of farming culture (Johnson & Mahan, 2020). The participant's experiences reflect an identity that is wrapped in the agrarian imperative. Valuing land as *the most meaningful* propels the acceptance of pain and hardship, as necessary, which results in isolation, chronic stress, and suicidality (Rosman, 2010). Issues relative to the primary identity also impact farmers' coping and wellness.

### Theme 2: Farmer Coping Skills

All of the participants indicated that farmers have a lack of healthy coping skills. Participant descriptions include "the absence of time for personal wellness," including physical health, healthy social outlets, and hobbies. Additionally, half of the participants identified addiction—both substance and behavioral addiction—as a coping mechanism. Jessica explained, "They don't see they have a problem because they have a house, they have an income, and they have a family. Typically, they have health issues, either high blood pressure, heart problems, or sleep problems." Tina said, "I also encourage, strongly, something that is usually missing in their lives, which is hobbies and a social life. Permission to stop working and have a little bit of fun once in a while." Michelle said, "Some of their coping skills are alcohol or white-knuckling it. Not many have helpful coping skills." Tony corroborated Michelle's opinion:

> I would say the coping skills or coping mechanism they use and what I see is drinking. There is no social outlet, and everybody goes to the bars. Their drinking is not social drinking. Their drinking is a lot higher. It would be every night after work. After work, all the guys get together, or even after a co-op they would not get home until 8:30 p.m. or 9:00 p.m. They will sit and drink an 18 pack before they go home.

Alcohol abuse is associated with increased mortality and morbidity due to the potential to cause disease and related loss of life quality (Alves et al., 2021). In consideration of the primary identity, a farmer's personal needs and wellness can become lost. Isolation and chronic stress without regard for personal wellness perpetuate rates of suicidality experienced by farmers (Bondy & Cole, 2019; Howard et al., 2020; Rosman, 2010).

**Theme 3: Suicidality**

Despite interrelated layers of ongoing work stress, poor coping skills, and addiction, none of the participants reported having a client who completed suicide. Instead, they described instances of limited and passive ideations. Tina said, "I also give suicidal ideation tests and several other tests of anxiety and depression. I've not had one yet that had suicidal ideations, which is kind of strange. That's an outlier." According to Michelle, "In my experience, to my knowledge, I haven't had a farmer with the kind of ideation that would concern me. It's more like, 'I need to solve this problem.'" Tony stated:

> I hear it through the agencies. Personally, where I've been for the last four years, and where I lived prior, nobody that I ever knew committed suicide. I'm sure it happens, but I just haven't seen it or heard of it out in any of my areas.

Anna added, "Not within the work that I have done. Not with the [farm] couples or families I've worked with." Jessica said, "No, not farmers, but I do know they think about it."

Rates of suicide in the agriculture industry have increased in recent years. Implications of these rates include sociocultural identity norms, isolation, increased rates of depression, and accessibility to firearms (Beautrais, 2018; Bossard et al., 2016; Ellis & Albrecht, 2017; Garnham & Bryant, 2014). Although the participants did not identify clients who completed suicide, they were able to identify that their clients experienced suicidal ideation. Farmer engagement in counseling impacts risk factors, as noted in the data, and research at the microsystem level. The outer ecological system levels will further the connection and interplay of the data described at the microsystem level.

## Ecological Level: The Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the connection and process between two or more microsystems (Cook, 2012), and in this case, each contains the farmer. For example, the mesosystem could refer to the impact of a farmer's work and family. At this level, family and farming demands affect the farmer and the relevant themes, including "addiction" and "family and couples counseling."

**Theme 1: Addiction**

As mentioned in the findings for coping skills, half of the participants identified addiction—both substance and behavioral. The theme of addiction at the mesolevel was connected to family, a noted generational pattern of addiction. Jessica said:

> I'm talking about alcoholism and gambling in past generations. Their parents and it goes way back. There is nothing with it, it's just part of the deal. We go out and we work hard. We come home and have a few drinks. It's whiskey and it's pretty strong stuff.

Anna shared, "Substance abuse, yes. I think it's pretty regular that farmers will work all day and drink all night or go to the bar for quite a while before coming home." Michelle concurred, saying, "I had one farmer tell me, 'You know all these country roads, people are drinking. There are open bottles of alcohol on those farm vehicles. It seems to be what they do. They work, then drink beer.'"

Farmers and those working in the agriculture industry experience high rates of suicidality, depression, and substance abuse (Beautrais, 2018; Bossard et al., 2016; Ellis & Albrecht, 2017; Garnham & Bryant, 2014). Pullen and Oser (2014) outlined "the family context of rural clients" as a contributing factor for substance use, which can become part of a family legacy—where family and community enable or use together. Addiction and intoxication not only affect the farmer but also have an impact on the dynamics of couples and families.

**Theme 2: Family and Couples Counseling**

All the participants agreed farmers are reluctant to attend counseling to address relationship issues. All participants reported that a referral from a family member, most often the wife, is the primary way farmers are seen in counseling. However, despite relational issues and family support, farmers' (males) participation in counseling may still be inconstant or absent. Jessica stated:

> It's usually the wife that will call and say, 'Ok I'm moving out now.' It's all or nothing extremes. Underlying issues that have gone on forever. They just keep getting buried and dug up and buried and dug up. It's just a slow process.

Anna said:

> When I can get the whole family in, its beautiful to see the healing going on. The couples I have seen had issues with communication and parenting. Stereotypically, the male does the farm work, and there is a struggle with connecting with the spouse and with parenting. Ideally, I see both parents, but typically it's just the mother. I think there is some hesitancy [farmers/fathers]. I have found that often the dads are not as engaged or they are just kind of there. Work stress comes into it a lot within the struggles between the couple.

The findings of Roy et al. (2016) support this theme, as farmers without past counseling experience are skeptical about receiving services. Concern over divorce and family well-being, however, may be interpreted (logically or morally) as a reason to engage in the counseling process. Moreover, the data supports the ecological concentric overlapping circles in which people live, as evidenced by the links between the mesosystem themes and the microsystem, as well as the exosystem. In this instance, the exosystem included external factors that impact the farmers.

## Ecological Level: The Exosystem

The exosystem refers to the linkage between two or more subsystems (Cook, 2012). In the case of rural farmers, at least one of these linked systems does not directly contain the farmer. For example, the relationship between a farmer's mental health to a counseling practice. The relevant themes for this level included stress and mental illness related to farming, physical distance and office hours, insurance and financial means, and help-seeking behavior.

**Theme 1: Stress and Mental Illness Related to Farming**

All the participants reported that farmers experience routine stress related to their work, as well as anxiety and depression that are interrelated to the other levels within the ecological lens. According to Sue, "Oftentimes it is stress related to their work or their profession as a farmer." Anna also suggested, "Economic factors definitely play a role in the amount of stress farmers have and how much of that stress transfers to the family or couple." Jessica added:

> If it's nice out they gotta be in the field. If its crappy out and they can't be in the field because of the weather, they're working on doing other things that need to get done. They're looking at finances, meetings with accountants, looking at spreadsheets, making sure they have enough fertilizer, feed, and whatever else. I mean it's just constant. If they do get a day that they can't be physically in the field, they're doing other things that have to be done.

Anna corroborated, "Economic factors definitely play a role in the amount of stress, and how much that stress transfers to the family or the couple. Then problems begin there." The data suggests that weather and climate changes impact quality of life, increasing stress and, potentially, decreasing the ability to cope with anxious and depressed moods.

**Theme 2: Physical Distance and Office Hours**

Members of rural communities and agricultural workers live and work in remote locations. It can often be too time-consuming to leave the farm, and many can't afford to take the time away to engage in counseling among other things. Four of the eight participants identified time and distance as barriers. Jessica shared:

> I think it's time. That is what I hear. It is the time and the travel. I am in the city, and they are rural. They have to commute in and out, which they like because nobody knows where they're going, but it ends up being a two-hour block of time when they could be doing something else. They could be moving cattle, or picking up feed, or meeting with the insurance companies or landlords of the land.

Michelle added, "Yes, it's probably time. My job and my life consume all of my time and energy." And Anna stated:

> I think the biggest barrier is the flexibility of hours and when they can come in. I know a lot of places have different policies for missed appointments. If you miss so many appointments, then you can no longer have services. A lot of places aren't even open past five. Even when farmers can make time to seek counseling, insurance and financial means also create barriers for services.

**Theme 3: Insurance and Financial Means**

Half of the participants identified insurance and financial means as a barrier for two reasons. Participants shared that farmers either may not have insurance or the financial means to pay for counseling out of pocket, or the farmers have insurance but not mental health coverage. Lori stated:

> Sometimes it's a lack of insurance. Their insurance is typically purchased out of pocket and does not cover mental health care. Even though there is a parity, unfortunately, they also do not opt to have that as a covered qualification. Number two, sometimes even if they are willing to come to counseling, the fees are a barrier themselves. If they have to pay out of pocket for a 45-minute appointment that can be too expensive.

According to Tony:

> It's limited financial funds. They don't want to put money towards it [counseling]. A lot of the farmers have insurance, but it's more for serious injuries or something serious like cancer. My clients, some of them were on Obamacare, but then with the Trump administration a lot of that was taken away. It has to come out of pocket. I try really hard, I mean, I'll go all the way down to $25 a session or $30 a session or ask what they can afford.

Regardless of having the potential time, money, and/or insurance, participants also reported a lack of help-seeking behaviors among farmers and agricultural workers.

**Theme 4: Help Seeking**

Common referrals to counseling services include court-ordered referrals due to incidences while intoxicated; employee assistance program referrals from their job; a doctor's referral to manage stress or after medication was started; or family referrals due to significant family issues and threats of divorce. Jessica stated, "They normally don't come in independently of their partners. They come in with their partners and even then, it is hit or miss." According to Michelle:

> The older farmers I have seen have been in a great deal of distress and it was almost a last-ditch effort. It's embarrassment, there is shame, they are suspicious of the whole process. A lot of them come as a result of their primary care doctor or something saying you need to come to therapy. They are more likely to go to their doctor first. They might be on an antidepressant or something like that.

Jessica also explained, "The families do come in and they are concerned about primarily the drinking and that's problematic." Tony added:

> A couple guys were anger issues [reasons for counseling referrals]. They got into a fight while drinking and they were court ordered to come. Some of the other ones were from employee assistance programs, if there was an issue at work, probably drinking related or something like that. That's where they got sent to me. Every now and again, I get one that will show up when their wife finally got them convinced to go to the doctor. I think its seen as a weakness. You know, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. You suck it up and just do it. There is ignorance about mental health.

Tina confirmed by saying:

> Family usually refers them [farmers]. They [family] pretty much say we gotta do something about this, this is intolerable. When it is depression, the doctors generally refer to my practice. I would say easily 90% are brought in by some other family member. Not that they're putting the blame on them, it's just the conflict that resides between the farmers and the family member.

This theme highlights the need to recognize the cultural norms relative to traditional male hegemony in rural communities and within this subculture specifically.

## Ecological Level: Macrosystem

Though the exosystem includes barriers for farmers, the macrosystem includes systemic barriers that affect farmers seeking and receiving counseling. The macrosystem is the broader level of the ecological system and is the furthest away from the center (i.e., the farmer). This layer is a social blueprint that continues the ideologies and organization of a particular culture or subculture (Cook, 2012). The relevant themes for this level included stigma and counselor education and training.

### Theme 1: Stigma

Stigma regarding counseling is prevalent in rural communities. Six of the eight participants identified stigma as a barrier to counseling for farmers specifically. Lori shared:

> Then the stigma. The Iowan farmers I see, they still have very strong stigma. I mean, not that there isn't stigma with mental health. I feel that's [stigma] lightening in city populations, but my rural population is almost 30 years behind. Its weakness, its inability to cope, that's some of the biggest barriers that prevent them from seeking services.

Tony added, "People equate mental health as being crazy. 'No, I'm not crazy, so I'm not going to see you.' It's still a lot of stigma. People don't want anyone to know they are coming to see me." Tony went on to elaborate that confidentiality and stigma co-exist by saying, "It's still a lot of stigma to it. People don't want anybody knowing they're coming. My entrance is in an alleyway so nobody can see anybody coming in."

According to Anna, there is a fear that counselors will share personal information despite knowing it is confidential, "I think within the small town world sometimes things just seem that they are not going to be confidential and that everyone is going to know. Word gets around pretty fast in small towns and small areas."

Stigma is a well-known barrier to seeking mental health services (Crumb et al., 2019; Larson & Corrigan, 2010) and can be conceptualized through public stigmas or self stigmas (Crumb et al., 2019). Public stigma is the stigma experience from the general population, which consists of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. Self-stigma is the stigma that an individual internalizes—the negativity of others, which affects the sense of self.

Hastings and Cohn (2013) describe the dynamic of rural life as living "in a fishbowl," where residents may recognize each other by vehicle, and to see a health provider at the grocery store is a reality. In these rural communities, farmers may not be as open to seeking counseling services—even when offered outside of a counseling office—due to the stigma about mental health. Education about mental illness may help reduce this stigma for farmers and their communities, but it is also important for counselors to have knowledge and training about farming culture.

**Theme 2: Counselor Education and Training**

In addition to the identifiable themes of each ecological level affecting farmer wellness, participants also recognized a gap in their education and training about farming culture. This theme describes a limited amount of knowledge surrounding the farming experience, as well as an absence of training resources. None of the participants reported a course within their education that was specifically designed to increase their understanding of the mental health needs of agricultural communities or farming culture. Lori said, "Unfortunately, for being from a local area and getting my degree locally, it is not something that our program specifically talked about." According to Sue, her education was pretty basic and shared, "I think back on my school, and I don't remember that [farming] coming up. There was nothing specific saying, 'You might work with farmers one day.' I would say that specific topics never came up." Tony corroborated by saying, "No, there wasn't really nothing. No classes or nothing. Even the classes that talked about different populations there was nothing."

Despite not having training in rural communities and culture, half of the participants reported growing up on a working farm. Those who grew up on a farm suggested that their personal experience working and living within the farming community was beneficial to their counseling practice. Tina shared, "I would have to say my own experience growing up on a farm. It's an understanding. I have an understanding of what their goal is or some of the challenges they have." Tony said, "What helped was my whole life growing up on a farm."

Even with some participants having personal experience, none of them reported seeing, hearing of, or attending any continued educational opportunities about the farming or agricultural population. Michelle said, "I've never seen anything." Lori said, "No, and again, maybe I am not aware of it. I get enough things in the mail, and I don't see a lot of talk addressing farming or the farming population." Sue said, "No, but that would be really nice if they were offered." Tony shared, "No, and it's an underserved population. What we need is education."

Michelle went on to say:

> I think it would be super helpful to have a training or a class on this population. It would be awesome especially for city people. There are a lot of misconceptions about farmers. We really don't understand their struggles and difficulties. Farmers and agricultural workers represent a distinct culture of their own. As counselors [we] are educated and trained to meet the needs of diverse cultures, counselors also need to gain further understanding of the best practices for this diverse community that are developed from in-depth research.

All participants in this study recognized farming as a lifestyle and culture more than "just a job." According to Tony, "For many of my farmers, it's a lifestyle and it is a culture for them." Jessica added, "It's important to recognize and understand and work within the culture we're working with. Farming culture is a culture." According to Tina, "Farming is more than a job; it's a passion and a way of life."

Participants also recognized that specific personal characteristics of farmers create individual identity. Jessica described farmers as, "Individualistic, hardworking, and as having sense of ownership and pride in their land, in their family, and their community." These are all statements that align with educational and training suggestions in previous research.

Clinicians need to understand the culture of rural environments and seek specialized training to provide appropriate treatment modalities (Bowen & Caron, 2016; Bray, 2016; Carrera et al., 2020). Additionally, a lack of cultural competency may impact a clinician's connection with the community and their employment options (Hasting & Cohn, 2013).

## Discussion

Participants in this study identified a variety of theoretical orientations and therapeutic interventions used when counseling farmers. No participant identified a known best practice for working with the agricultural community. Techniques included the humanistic/person-centered approach; cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT); dialectical behavioral therapy; acceptance and commitment therapy; trauma-informed approaches, including Eye Movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR); family systems; solution-focused; psychoeducation; and play therapy. The two most used approaches were humanistic and CBT.

Five of the eight participants identified CBT as a best practice. Six of the eight participants identified humanism or being person-centered as a best practice. Three of the eight participants identified psychoeducation as a primary best practice. Though the participants highlighted a variety of approaches, none understood an evidence-based approach to meet the needs of farmers and agricultural workers.

Clinicians seek to know client needs, as well as apply best practices to improve quality of life. The ecological approach reflects a culturally inclusive and dynamic approach to counseling farmers that envelops many of the elements outlined by participants—regardless of professional discipline or work setting. And, as all behavioral health professionals share common goals, ethics, and practice, when working with clients (Cook, 2012), the ecological approach offers clinicians a broad therapeutic lens to help understand their clients and the experiences they have with other people and things that create their personal niches, referring to counselor experiences (Cook, 2012).

### Limitations

This study provided in-depth insight into the experience of counselors who work with farmers in Iowa. While the small number of participants may be considered a limitation in quantitative designs, the sample size was congruent with the qualitative phenomenological nature of this research, and rich, in-depth data were collected that captured the deep cultural needs of the population. This study may not be generalizable to other rural and farming populations, who may have unique elements e.g., geographic location in relation to proximity in the United States as well as proximity to urban environments, to their cultural identity. However, generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research. Rather, the results could be contextually transferable e.g., knowledge and meaning making, to farmers in other geographic locations across the United States and to female farmers. This study focused specifically on male farmers, but the inclusion of female farmers could provide additional understanding of best practices considering that participants reported recommendations to counseling came from the wives of the farmers. We also relied on the shared experiences of the participants whom we assumed offered honest and accurate recollection; however, participants may have withheld or varied their reports to look more favorable to the primary investigator during interviews.

### Implications

The results of this study confirm and expand on counseling literature; however, further investigation on the topic is necessary. For example, the stigma associated with seeking help among rural populations (Crumb et al., 2019; Larson & Corrigan, 2010); the need for culturally appropriate education and training for counselors who will work with rural populations who may have clients who are part of agricultural communities or

farming culture (Bray, 2016; Caron, 2016); and family involvement in help-seeking and counseling services (Cole & Bondy, 2020).

Future research might include a survey study that includes a larger number of participants across multiple rural settings, which could result in generalizability. The current findings may also indicate a need to interview farmers directly, as this will contribute to the literature and provide counselors and other mental health professionals additional insights about "farmer mental health" as it relates to the ecological factors they face daily. Also, directly interviewing farmers could offer counselors and mental health professionals a rich perspective on the barriers and motivators of seeking mental health services, which, in turn, could direct counselor training and education so farmers and other agricultural workers are better served.

## Conclusion

This study shed light on the unique challenges and experiences of counselors who work with male farmers in rural Iowa and emphasized the critical role of the ecological systems in shaping these experiences. The nine themes identified across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem highlight the multifaceted nature of the mental health issues faced by farmers, including identity, coping mechanisms, and the profound impact of suicidality. The findings reinforce existing literature on the stigma associated with seeking help in rural communities, the need for culturally appropriate training for counselors, and the importance of family involvement in mental health interventions.

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