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Seeking Support for Mental Health: Evaluating Social Identity and Social Capital Agricultural Producers and their Help-Seeking Preferences

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Abstract

Stigma, cultural norms, nature of work and lack of access to care are among the many variables that place agricultural producers particularly at risk for compromised mental health and related illness. One variable related to improved mental health outcomes is help-seeking intention, which can be mediated by variables such as social identity and social capital. The study's purpose was to characterize these variables among producers and describe the intention of agricultural producers to seek mental health assistance. Researchers conducted a bi-regional state survey of agricultural producers in 32 Texas counties. A representative sample of Texas agricultural producers (n = 429) were surveyed to understand their social identity and social capital as well as their intentions to seek mental health assistance for personal or emotional problems and for suicide ideation. Results support the use of identity-based programming to increase social capital, in conjunction with tailored mental health education and training to promote healthy help-seeking behavior among agricultural producers. Researchers recommend innovative solutions for agricultural extension to consider for improving stakeholder's lives. An agricultural extension central resource or information hub, which houses national resources and information about this growing area of research would be a valuable investment of time and resources.

Keywords

farmers, suicide, public health, extension, professional development

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Mental health issues are more common in rural areas due to the lack of accessibility, availability, and acceptability of mental health services (Newman et al., 2021). Included in this population of rural, underserved residents is agricultural producers and their families. Research shows that agricultural producers are at increased risk for stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental-health related problems (Milner et al., 2013; Saane et al., 2004). Evidence suggests that multiple factors relating to producer lifestyle, agrarian norms, and stigma surrounding mental health contribute to this growing epidemic within the agriculture industry and delay producers from seeking help (Peter et al., 2000; Roy et al., 2017).

According to Cornally and McCarthy (2011), help-seeking behavior, provides insight to understand patient delay and intention to take action. Rural areas have higher suicide rates juxtaposed to those residing in urban areas (Harris et al., 2016). Research by Deane et al. (2001) found that higher levels of suicide ideation correlated with lower levels of intention in young people. This was further affirmed by research from Calear et al. (2014) which found that adults experiencing thoughts of suicide had lower intention to seek help than those who were not.

Extension organizations and higher education institutions are increasingly challenged with producing societal impacts that improve the lives of stakeholders (Strong & Israel, 2009). Rural public health professionals desire to better collaborate and engage with other community organizations such as religious organizations, food pantries, and agricultural extension on programming (Ziller & Milkowski, 2020). Extension systems should identify local priorities to implement the highest quality and impactful programs (Harder et al., 2009) to improve producer mental health. Producing program impacts that improve stakeholders' lives are expectations and recommended competencies of proficient and community-responsive agricultural extension workers (Benge et al., 2011; Harder et al., 2013; Strong & Harder, 2011). As evidenced by current health data, there is an immense need to understand help-seeking behaviors of agricultural producers for mental health, including their social groups and sources from which they would be willing to seek help. Findings could contribute greatly to rural health practice to better serve agricultural producers and their communities.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study utilized an integration of the Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action and social identity theory as the theoretical framework. These theories helped provide a foundation for understanding individuals' intention to engage in certain behaviors from a social identity perspective.

According to the theory of reasoned action, there are two main constructs that influence an individual's intent, and in turn, their resulting behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). These include attitudes and subjective norms. Attitude refers to a positive or negative feeling about someone or something, and subjective norms are determined by the motivation to behave according to

an important person or group's beliefs. Each of these are influenced by various systems of belief. The theory of reasoned action and its subsequent models have been widely used and recognized as effective models for predicting and evaluating various determinants of health behavior and intention (Montaño & Kasyrzyk, 2015).

Scholars have noted the relevance of using social identity theory in conjunction with health behavior models (Fielding et al., 2008). Thus, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) was included as an extension of this framework, as a variable influencing each of the theory of reasoned action predictor variables. Social identity theory posits that as highly social beings, individuals become invested in intergroup relationships that form their identity and influence their behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Through a social identity lens, researchers had the opportunity to assess dimensions and strength of the identity of agricultural producers as an occupational group.

There are mediating variables that can influence attitudes and encourage health-promoting behavior. Studies by Groth et al. (2017) and Fielding et al. (2008) used social identity theory or variations of it to explain decision-making and behavior relating to certain agricultural practices. Others find that social identity and the cultural norms associated with that identity also affect help-seeking. Polain et al. (2011) reported agricultural producers over the age of 58 resisted help-seeking for mental health providers due to their lack of awareness of farmer lifestyle. Producers claimed provider services were insensitive to their culture and livelihood (Polain et al., 2011).

Another dimension of societal influence on behavior is social capital, which explains relationships, networks, and various outside individuals or groups that impact one's beliefs and actions. Like social identity, social capital has been used extensively in research involving agricultural producers and also in understanding mental health outcomes. Research suggests social capital promotes health and well-being when emphasized and shows that increased social capital can improve mental health outcomes and significantly contribute to reducing stress, illness, and depression (Haslam et al., 2009; Lin, 2001; Magson et al., 2014). In the current literature, little attention is given to understanding the social identity and social groups of agricultural producers or the potential impacts on their help-seeking behavior with regard to mental health.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand the intentions of agricultural producers to seek help for issues pertaining to their mental health, identify sources from which producers would be willing to seek help and determine if occupational degree of involvement effects help-seeking intention. This study had three objectives:

1. Characterize the social identity and social capital reported by agricultural producers.
2. Describe the degree of help-seeking reported by agricultural producers.
3. Describe scores for help-seeking sources reported by agricultural producers.

Methods

Researchers developed a cross-sectional survey, adhering to Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al., 2014). In addition to this construct for personal characteristics, the instrument measured five variables. Producers were asked Likert-scale questions to characterize their social identity, social capital, self-stigma, likelihood of seeking help and preferred helping agent. Pre-existing scales for all constructs were adapted for use in the instrument. The scales examined in this manuscript included the Collective Occupational Identity Construct (COIC), Personal Social Capital Scale (PSCS) and the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ).

Purposive sampling was used to target agricultural producers in Texas between the ages of 18-89 years of age, using databases provide by Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) Extension agents in the West and East Texas Regions. Researchers operationally defined agricultural producers using the definition provided within the Code of Federal Regulations as one who is directly engaged in producing or has legal rights to harvest a commodity (Code of Federal Regulations, 2012). In total, county agriculture and natural resource extension agents from 32 Texas counties sent recruitment emails to 5,137 potential participants via email. Of those 32 Texas counties, 75% (n = 24) are designated as rural counties. Of those 5,137 emails, 92 were undeliverable, resulting in a population of 5,045. Of those 5,045 potential participants, researchers achieved a sample size of 429 participants, equating to a response rate of 8.50%.

This manuscript looks exclusively at descriptive statistics derived from participant responses from the COIC, PSCS and the GHSQ to understand the salience of the producer identity, the extent of producer's social groups and the nature of those relationships. Additionally, items from GHSQ helped researchers characterize producers' willingness to seek help and the sources from which they would be likely to turn to for help. Researchers calculated means and standard deviations for each item. Additionally, researchers calculated overall grand means for each of the three scales to get an analysis of the central tendencies social identity, social capital and help-seeking intention of the sample. Results from each construct were compared for deviations and similarities, leading to potential opportunities for building sustainable systems of support.

To control for nonresponse error, researchers compared early to late respondents and found no statistically significant differences in their responses (Lindner et al., 2001). Thus, researchers were able to obtain support for the generalizability of responses to the population of Texas agricultural producers. In total, 39 respondents did not self-report as agricultural producers. However, when given the opportunity to self-describe involvement in the industry, 19 of those 39 descriptions aligned with the utilized definition of agricultural producer and were recoded as such. Because we did not find the remaining 20 answers to be statistically significantly different from the remaining respondents, we did not exclude them from analysis. Content validity was achieved through collaboration with committee members and discussion with other agriculturalists and extension practitioners. Upon completion of data analysis, reliability was

confirmed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) for PSCS which had 38 items (α = 0.94), COIC which had 11 items (α = 0.82) and the GHSQ, which had 28 items (α = 0.89).

Findings

The descriptive statistics from the Collective Occupational Identity Construct (COIC) (Groth et al., 2017) is presented in Table 1. Collectively, the overall mean for social identity of agricultural producers within this sample (n = 355) was high (M = 4.68, SD = 0.75).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Collective Occupational Identity Construct

Items	*n*	*M*	*SD*
In general, I'm glad that I'm an agricultural producer.	354	5.32	1.01
I very much identify with agricultural producers in my area.	351	5.01	1.04
What happens to agricultural producers as a whole will have an effect on what happens in my life.	350	4.84	1.07
Being a part of the larger group of agricultural producers is an important reflection of who I am.	350	4.62	1.22
I have a strong sense of belonging or attachment to other agricultural producers.	350	4.58	1.17
In general, others respect agricultural producers.	348	4.57	1.07
When someone criticizes agricultural producers, it feels like a personal insult.	349	4.56	1.35
My agricultural production activities distinguish me from those who are not agricultural producers.	351	4.48	1.27
I consider myself to be a typical agricultural producer in this area.	351	4.26	1.31
My regular social contacts and social relationships are with other agricultural producers.	349	4.20	1.16

Note. Participants scored statements from *1 =not applicable; 2= strongly disagree; 3=disagree; 4=neutral; 5=agree; 6 = strongly agree.*

There were four items used from the Personal Social Capital Scale in the instrument. Three of the four pertained to people or people groups in their social groups. These items and the descriptive statistics from the top four sub-item in the Personal Social Capital Scale (PSCS) (Chen et al., 2009) are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

How many of the people in each of the following categories do you keep in routine contact?

Items	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Your immediate family members	345	1.67	.928
Your friends	346	2.38	.812
Your relatives	345	2.62	.888
People in your community	345	2.83	.718

Note. Participants scored each item from *1 = all; 2 = most; 3 = some; 4 = few; 5 = none*. A lower mean represented a higher social capital score.

There were five categories of utilized to assess farmer's trust of members in their social system (see Table 3).

Table 3

Among the people in each of the following categories, how many can you trust?

Items	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Your immediate family members	336	1.64	.96
Your friends	336	2.03	.88
Extension Agent	326	2.11	1.11
Your relatives	335	2.26	.99
Extension Specialist	341	3.79	1.01

Note. Participants scored each item from *1= all; 2 = most; 3 = some; 4 = few; 5 = none*. A lower mean represented a higher social capital score.

Table 4 illustrates the five categories utilized to assess farmer's trust of members in their social system.

Table 4

Among the people in each of the following categories, how many will definitely help you upon your request?

Items	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Your immediate family members	336	1.64	.96
Your friends	336	2.03	.88
Extension Agent	326	2.11	1.11
Your relatives	335	2.26	.99

Note. Participants scored each item from *1 = all;, 2 = most; 3 = some; 4 = few; 5 = none*. A lower mean represented a higher social capital score.

Overall, the grand mean for responses within this construct for agricultural producers in this sample were relatively low (*M* = 2.73, *SD* = 0.56). Because anchors in this scale were reverse

coded, a lower mean represented a higher social capital score. So, while the mean appears low, the social capital of agricultural producers in this sample was relatively high. The last item in this scale asked about the resources possessed by these individuals. Participants scored each item from 1 to 5, with 5 representing *none*. The lowest resource reported as being possessed by these people groups was mental health education (*M* = 3.76, *SD* = 0.97).

Objective two aimed to describe the degree of help-seeking reported by agricultural producers. In order to achieve this objective, researchers calculated a grand mean for both questions within the help-seeking construct. This resulted in a statistical mean of responses (*n* = 312) for help-seeking intention for both personal or emotional problems (*M* = 3.77, *SD* = 0.95) and responses (*n* = 296) for suicidal thoughts (*M* = 3.53, *SD* = 1.24). On the provided scale, these fell between anchors 3 and 5, where 3 was labeled as *Unlikely* and 5 was labeled *Likely*. According to the scale provided, narratively, these means fell between the statement *Unlikely*, and the most neutral anchor, which the creators of the original scale left unlabeled. Another important finding from this objective was the difference in means. While only slightly, the statistical mean for help-seeking for personal or emotional problems was greater than the mean calculated for help-seeking for suicidal thoughts.

For objective three, researchers described scores for help-seeking sources reported by agricultural producers. The top four responses for help-seeking for a personal or emotional problem are listed in Tables 5.

As shown, the top three sources identified by the sample as being the most likely to be sought out when experiencing personal or emotional problems were *intimate partner* (*girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, de' facto*) (*M* = 5.50, *SD* = 1.85), *Friend* (*not related to you*) (*M* = 4.70, *SD* = 1.54), and *Other relative or family member* (*M* = 4.45, *SD* = 1.67). The item that received the lowest means was *Phone Helpline* (*M* = 2.54, *SD* = 1.67).

Unlike the first question which asked about likelihood of help-seeking for personal and emotional problems, the second question on the GHSQ asked about sources one would be likely to seek help from if they were experiencing suicidal thoughts. Responses pertaining to the second question in the General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) (Wilson et al., 2005) were somewhat shocking. Similar to the first question, participants scored *Intimate partner* (*girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, de' facto*) (*M* = 5.06, *SD* = 2.26) the highest, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics from "If you were having a personal or emotional problem, how likely is it that you would seek help from the following people?"

Items	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Intimate partner (girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, de' facto)	309	5.50	1.85
Friend (not related to you)	311	4.70	1.54
Other relative or family member	310	4.45	1.67
Minister or religious leader (e.g. Priest, Rabbi, Chaplain, Church leader)	311	4.41	1.94

Note. Participants scored items from 1 to 7. Anchors were labeled as *1= extremely unlikely; 3 = unlikely; 5 = likely; 7 = extremely likely.*

Within the item for suicidal thoughts, agricultural producers scored *Minister or religious leader* (*e.g. Priest, Rabbi, Chaplain, Church leader*) (*M* = 4.43, *SD* = 2.20) and *Mental health professional* (*e.g. psychologist, social worker, counselor*) (*M* = 4.36, *SD* = 2.07) high enough to grant them the second and third largest mean. According to the scale provided, these means fell between anchor statements 4 and 5, where 4 was the midpoint of the scale and 5 indicated that intention was *Likely* (see Table 6).

Table 6

Descriptive statistics from "If you were experiencing suicidal thoughts, how likely is it that you would seek help from the following people?"

Items	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Intimate partner (girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, de' facto)	292	5.06	2.25
Minister or religious leader (e.g. Priest, Rabbi, Chaplain, Church leader)	292	4.43	2.20
Mental health professional (e.g. psychologist, social worker, counselor)	292	4.36	2.07
Friend (not related to you)	292	4.35	2.08

Note. Participants scored items from 1 to 7. Anchors were labeled as *1 = extremely unlikely; 3 = unlikely; 5=likely; 7 = extremely likely.*

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Data provided evidence for the strength and salience of farmer identity and its potential implications on behavior. When agricultural producers identify broadly to their social group, especially when this identity is salient, it can positively impact their help-seeking behavior (Haslam et al., 2009). This is an imperative finding, given the positive effects that enhanced social identity and increased social capital can have on help-seeking behaviors and improved mental health outcomes of agricultural producers (Hedge et al., 2017; Magson et al., 2014).

Intimate partner, friend, and other relative or family member surfaced as top help-seeking sources for personal or emotional problems and for suicide ideation as well. This aligns with research that suggests that agriculturalists have closer familial relationships than those in other occupations—both in proximity and degree of contact (Fraser et al., 2005). Similarly, data from the personal social capital scale (PSCS) showed that immediate family members, friends, and relatives play a large role in agricultural producers' social capital and support networks.

Mental health professional represented the second highest mean in the dataset for the help-seeking in regard to thoughts of suicide. This is an important finding, as it contrasts an abundance of literature on help-seeking and mental healthcare service use. Research suggests that there is a vast underutilization of mental health services and that various factors, such as availability, accessibility, and affordability, all influence likelihood of help-seeking (Newman et al., 2021). This is especially true for agricultural producers, who battle accessibility and availability of care and whose insurance coverage might not include basic mental healthcare.

Immense opportunity exists to increase help-seeking intentions of production agriculturalists in order to achieve improved mental health outcomes. Researchers recommend that attention be given to improving professional mental healthcare in rural areas, or those dense with clientele in agriculture. However, due to shortage of mental health professionals and facilities and barriers specific to producers like geographical distance to care, lack of insurance coverage, etc., researchers recommend that agricultural extension systems, community leaders and local legislators consider other ways in which agricultural producers might receive these services.

Innovative solutions for agricultural extension to consider for improving stakeholder's lives (Benge et al., 2011; Harder et al., 2013; Strong & Harder, 2011) include telehealth, traveling or regional rural 'farm' counselors, faith-based counselors through places of worship of religious organizations, or conjoining mental health services with other events or agriculturally-focused conventions/meetings—perhaps in conjunction with agricultural agencies and farmers associations (Wynn et al., 2013). These partnerships will help practitioners offer culturally appropriate and sustainable intervention and treatment options for agricultural producers. These efforts will be maximized if the agencies push these educational materials community-wide, to raise awareness and promote help-seeking within the agricultural community, reduce stigma, and grow support networks and increase social capital of agricultural producers.

Lastly, one of the largest barriers to investigating mental health and resources within the agricultural industry was the lack of information both in peer-reviewed literature and in the media. This would suggest that struggling producers, practitioners, or researchers looking for guidance would be met with the same frustration. Creating an agricultural extension central resource or information hub, which houses national resources and information about this growing area of research would be a valuable investment of time and resources. Additionally, continued research broadly on health behaviors and help-seeking intention of agricultural producers for mental health-related struggles cannot be understated.

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