

Living in contrasting agricultural worlds and yet experiencing similar anxieties

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Abstract

The special issue *Living in contrasting agricultural worlds and yet experiencing similar anxieties* is one of the products of the bilateral scientific cooperation between Slovenia and the USA between 2022 and 2024, which aims to jointly reflect on how to deal with distress of people who farm. Despite the contrasting agricultural worlds, farmers and farm workers in both states are exposed to similar megatrends and pressures of modernized agriculture, which is reflected in the farm distress phenomenon, and deaths by suicide. In their contributions, the researchers from the US Midwest and Slovenia also inform the reader about the contrasting research traditions and interventions in farmer distress, and why the lack of cultural understanding of the phenomenon increases the likelihood of failure of prevailing health interventions.

KEYWORDS: bilateral scientific cooperation between Slovenia and the USA, farmer distress, research traditions, health interventions

Introduction

The special issue *Living in contrasting agricultural worlds and yet experiencing similar anxieties* is a product of the ongoing bilateral scientific cooperation between Slovenia and the United States Managing Social Pressures and Personal Distress on Family Farms (2022–2024). Before readers dive into the five research articles that address the experience of distress in farming or how this phenomenon is addressed through the literature review and a discussion of the health statistics of farmers and farm workers, the guest editors provide a brief description of the rationale for this scientific collaboration, from end to beginning, so to speak. They begin with their first impressions from their respective fields' activities in the United States and Slovenia, and only then explain the circumstances that led to this joint project of bilateral scientific cooperation between Slovenia and the United States. They conclude the introduction to the special issue with brief summaries of the content of the individual research articles.

First observations during the tours

On the farm in Nebraska

The itinerary, designed by my (Duška's) host Ellen from the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health in Omaha, Nebraska, said, "Wednesday, October 12, 2022, a farm tour, North Bend NE." On the farm, Ellen and I were welcomed by Alice,¹ the farmer's wife. First, she took us to the store—a kind of office where the men start their workday every morning and communicate about the daily tasks. Alice pointed to the pictures and photos on the wall and proudly told the story of a three-generation farm. In the next hall, a long truck trailer for transporting corn was waiting for a driver, and outside there were huge corn silos and a beautiful wooden house where the family of her youngest son lived. At the moment, the men were not around but already in the fields harvesting corn. We all went there. It was a windy and very cold day compared to the previous day when the thermometer showed an unbelievably high 28 degrees Celsius for October. On the drive to the field, Alice talked about the irrigation system referring to the recent floods in 2019, the location of the fields, and how now during harvest all of her men, including her 84-year-old father-in-law and hired workers, work non-stop day and night. Arriving on the first harvest zone, Alice introduced me to a hired worker with whom I made a few laps on a John Deere tractor. He honestly admitted that he had never heard of Slovenia and asked me about farming opportunities in such a small country. He was permanently employed by a gas company, and this was his part-

¹ All names of farm hosts are pseudonyms.

time job during harvest time. As in Slovenia, tractor drivers work over 16 hours a day during harvest time, but he did not complain. On the contrary, with a smile on his face, he emphasized that it was a well-paid extra job and that this year's work was much easier than last year's as far as neck pain was concerned. New equipment—a screen in front of him—enabled him to check the fall of corn kernels from a (combine) pipe onto a (tractor) trailer without turning his head over his shoulder.

Next was Alice's husband, but before I took a seat in his combine, I was introduced to their three sons, who laughingly struggled to pronounce my last name. It seemed that Alice and his men really wanted to impress me with fascinating modern machinery, the visitor from the former socialist country until now under their cognitive radar. Anyway, in October 2021, I spent a few days and nights during harvest on one of the largest family farms in the Slovenian fieldwork location, on a farm that was equipped with comparable harvesters. Alice's husband, Bob, was quiet at first, so I opened the conversation by telling him about farming in Slovenia. He nodded each time when I summarized what I observed to be the main concerns and fears of my research participants—people who farm. He was surprised that Slovenian farmers have similar concerns, emphasizing that he personally does not like large agribusinesses and is afraid of the unpredictable consequences of the Ukraine war, financial risks, and the weather. He went on to say that he loves his work on the farm, that you should be born a farmer (not made one), that farmers are their own bosses, and so on. Bob showed me the extent of his flooded fields three years ago (2019) and confessed that he was still beside himself when he saw those photos, all the material accumulated by the water in his fields, and the long hours he spent cleaning every square foot. Meanwhile, somewhat lost in his dreams, he continued his tale of the beautiful countryside, especially when the trees changed colors, and again his love of farming came out. This time I nodded and supported his thoughts with similar observations from Slovenia. Bob went on to explain corn varieties, stopping a combine and inviting me to check out how full and beautiful the corn cobs were on the ground. Back at the combine, he pointed out specific strips of fields with better and worse corn, and again at photos over small pipes with mechanisms to irrigate the fields. During an interesting discussion about the average size of farmland in the US and Slovenia, Alice treated us to lunch. After lunch I joined Bob's father John on the tractor. The old man told me that his father had owned a tractor back in the 1930s, which was before he was born. There were cows on Dad's farm, and the animals required that you be present in the barn at all times, despite cold or rain. John himself has eight children, four sons and four daughters, saying, "My math worked out" (laughs). John is a fit old man, partially deaf, very religious, and surprisingly, he knew how to manage a screen in front of him.

He told me that there had always been fluctuations in farming—the ups and downs. But as a farmer, you have to respond quickly. They (his current family) have always found the way out so far, but he has noticed that the land is getting more and more expensive. After two laps around the field, I finished my tour and joined Alice and Ellen. Alice told me that his father-in-law is very spiritual, and responded to my comment that he does not pay much attention to current developments in agriculture. She explained to me that he believes that his destiny is already predetermined, and that he behaves according to that belief. Suddenly Bob came up to our car, hugged me and pressed something into my hand. It was a roll of money, a day's earnings. He asked me to give this money to a young farmer in Slovenia, a beginner. We were all touched. When Ellen and Alice asked me what I had told him during my combine tour, I simply replied that we had talked about the concerns of farmers in Slovenia and in the United States.

Talking to farmers in Slovenia

Duška planned a thorough itinerary for my (Brandi's) short two-week visit in June of 2023: from produce and hops farms in the lowlands to highland dairy producers, to a very memorable day with Marko the beekeeper. We visited Marko's farm on a warm, sunny day. The sky was clear and blue, and the mountains were clearly visible. His backyard was nearly in full bloom and was filled with many plants that were familiar to me in Iowa. The purple coneflower and black-eyed Susans were nearly blooming. These are key members of the native tallgrass prairie family in my region. There were also borage and other herbs, all being tended by Marko's honey bees. He had both the traditional Slovenian beehives, as well as the Langstroth hives that are familiar to us in the US. I was surprised that he said he prefers the Langstroth hives, because they are more flexible and easier to add space for a rapidly growing colony. In Iowa, we worry about pesticide drift on bees and other sensitive crops, but Marko described how important bees are in Slovenia and how his neighbors take care to keep chemicals away from his hives. We also watched warily as a large military-style airplane flew low overhead. Marko said that was not normal. It was one of the few moments when the Russian invasion of Ukraine felt close during my visit. Marko talked about his award-winning sparkling mead, which was delicious, and his desire to sell to markets in the United States. Like farmers in Iowa, he is thinking about global markets and how to expand his operation.

Another day took us up to the mountains, to a traditional *planina*, where dairy cattle were enjoying the warm summer months and rich grass in the highlands. We had a beer and a long chat with an older farmer who milked his cows and made cheese every day.

Tourists who hiked through could buy a wheel of cheese and stop for a rest. He sipped schnapps and explained how he was probably the last person in his family who would live this lifestyle. His children did not want to milk cows every day or live all summer away from their families. He reflected on the knowledge that is being lost as generations move away from traditional farming. I reflected on how tragic it would be if that delicious cheese was no longer made.

Toward the end of my visit, I gave a presentation at the Chamber of Agriculture in a bright room with tile floors and chairs set neatly in rows. I had my first experience with simultaneous translation, thanks to two accomplished multi-lingual translators set up in the back. The audience ranged from energetic young farmers to older men who, like the dairy farmer we met days before, were wondering about the future of their farms. I shared information about Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health as well as policies in the United States that support farmers. We talked about global markets, policies, and social support for farmers. One person asked about "social security," and another person laughed and pointed out that the United States doesn't have any social security policies. The younger farmers talked about the challenges of starting a new farming operation and that sometimes older generations are not interested in their new ideas. An older farmer talked about his son, who is not interested in farming. They also talked about the difficulties of navigating markets in Europe and globally and the ways that environmental regulations sometimes disrupt their production practices.

It is interesting to be so far from home, yet find such familiarity in each conversation. The issues farmers talked about in Slovenia felt so similar to many of the issues in Iowa, even though the culture, landscape, and agricultural products are vastly different. Farmers are worried about the future of their farms, they feel neglected and criticized by urban dwellers who do not understand their work; they feel that farming is more than a job and is a lifestyle they were born or called into. Young farmers are passionate and energetic. I often think of Anja and her busy life as a parent and a farmer. She and other young farmers, both in the US and Slovenia, make me hopeful for agriculture's future. They are good farmers who are also politically savvy and very worldly. Our food system is in good hands if we can let them lead.

Contrasting but similar agricultural worlds in Slovenia and Iowa

In June 2019, I, Duška, reached out to Brandi via email after receiving contact directly from Kelley Donham, professor emeritus and co-author of the monograph *Agricultural medicine* (2016), which piqued my interest in this interdisciplinary area of research. I

asked him to suggest someone from the University of Iowa who was working on or interested in cross-cutting issues between sociocultural or medical anthropology and farmers' occupational health. He responded that, at the University of Iowa, anthropologists have been involved as an important link in health since 1955 (with interruptions) and that Brandi Janssen, as an anthropologist, now directs Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH). I immediately informed Brandi of my intention and changed research interests from various imageries of sustainable agriculture in Slovenia to the wellbeing of food producers. My intention was to study the suffering and creativity of different generations and genders on family farms in a post-1991 context of radical agricultural change in Slovenia, also motivated by the recent estimate that people working in agriculture belong to the group "skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers", which ranks first among other occupational groups with a crude suicide rate four times higher than the total crude rate of all occupational groups in 2016 (Roy & Knežević Hočevár, 2019).

Initially communicating via email, we met at a Zoom meeting in 2020 to discuss our shared interests as anthropologists related to farm distress. When a funding announcement was published by the Slovenian Research Agency in 2021, we agreed to apply to the call for a bilateral research collaboration between Slovenia and the United States to think together about the culturally specific responses to the seemingly universal farming stress phenomenon.² In fact, farmers around the world are experiencing similar megatrends in agriculture, for example, the ever-decreasing number of small family farms and the increasing number of large, industrialized farms, the ever-changing issues of agricultural policy; the growing voice of consumers, the public, and powerful food retailers; the rise of niche markets and local food production; the rise of new players such as Brazil, Argentina, India, and China in the global market of agricultural commodity producers; advancing technological tools for agricultural production; climate change; the challenge of producing food for nine billion people by 2050; the emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic and infectious diseases in animal agriculture; and food safety issues (cf. Donham & Thelin, 2016). In addition, overlap between many of these circumstances has contributed to almost universally high rates of stress and suicide (Behere & Bhise, 2009), and the scenarios in Slovenia and the U.S. (Iowa) are consistent with global trends: both countries' farmers face pressures from climate change and volatile global markets that affect all farm operations. Furthermore, agricultural settings in Slovenia

² We use the term "farming or agricultural stress" as a synonym for chronic stress or stress-related illness in medical discourse, referring to people who farm (farmers, their relatives, and farm workers). We also use the term "farmer distress or suffering" to talk about the phenomenon.

and Iowa have small total populations (Iowa: 3.1 million, Slovenia: 2.1 million), with about 5% of residents reporting being primarily engaged in agriculture (2017 Census of Agriculture; Žaucer & Puc, 2019). Iowa's primary agricultural products include corn, soybeans, pork, and laying hens. Slovenia's main crops are corn, wheat, potatoes, and fruit. Both Iowa and Slovenia are net food importers, and both have aging agricultural populations that are moving out of rural areas (Kladnik et al., 2020; Lasley, 2020).

In both states, however, responses and ascribed meanings to farmer distress are culturally specific and shaped by their respective contexts and government regulations. The first aspect concerns the different historical contexts. Farmer distress, research, and interventions in the U.S. were significantly shaped by the agricultural crisis of the 1980s, when many farmers went bankrupt, while the radical agricultural transformation in Slovenia is related to the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, the establishment of a sovereign nation-state in 1991, and accession to the European Union in 2004. In the U.S. (Iowa), there is a long tradition of agricultural medicine and several programs to assist and counsel distressed farmers, many of which are managed by I-CASH, while Slovenia has a high-quality public health system but no agricultural medicine or appropriate assistance for farmer wellbeing. Unlike Slovenia, Iowa has long recognized that the high incidence of illness, injury, and death among farmers, farm workers, and their families is a major challenge to the sustainability of agriculture. To address this problem, Iowa legislators Wendell Pellett (R) and Josephine Gruhn (D) co-sponsored the bill in 1990 that established Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (Iowa Code, 262.78). Although the center was established at the University of Iowa, it combines the expertise of Iowa State University, the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship to reduce agricultural injuries and illnesses. Farmer mental health has been a major focus of I-CASH over the past five years and has led to several collaborative projects and new products from the center.

Although there is an established field of agricultural safety and health in Iowa and the U.S., it is only recently that social science-trained scholars have become meaningfully involved. Indeed, the health consequences of increasingly modernized agriculture did not receive much attention from anthropologists and other social scientists in the United States until the agricultural crisis of the 1980s. No one calculated the losses in economic efficiency and productivity that result from these kinds of health problems in agriculture. On the contrary, conventional measures of economic productivity and efficiency did not consider the excess health toll of industrial agriculture on the health of farmers, farm workers, and their families, but rather the costs (e.g., of land, machinery, seed, feed,

veterinary supplies, insurance, and fertilizers) and the quantity of inputs relative to the price obtained and the level of output (Thu, 1998). Research and interventions have been led by health care professionals and educators, and engineers from land-grant institutions, while anthropologists have traditionally focused on non-state peoples or agriculture among peasants in so-called Third World states (Thu, 2016). Similarly, urban discourses on agricultural health and safety dominated in Slovenia, especially those led and justified by agronomists, agricultural economists, and engineers.

Therefore, we believed this bilateral collaboration would not only help to continue I-CASH's collaborative approaches to addressing farm distress, but also to promote emerging and novel work on this topic in Slovenia.³

Mutual visits

In March 2022, the bilateral collaboration Managing Social Pressures and Personal Distress on Family Farms (BI-US/22-24-134) was approved, and I, Duška, initially spent three months (from September to December) at the Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH) in Iowa to extend my 10-month field research findings about farmer distress in Slovenia. Brandi created a detailed schedule of activities during my visit to I-CASH and organized additional short visits to three other NIOSH⁴ Centers for Agricultural Safety and Health in the region to learn more about their approaches to reducing farmer and farm worker distress. These were the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health in Omaha, Nebraska; the Upper Midwest Center for Agricultural Safety and Health in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, Wisconsin. At I-CASH, I attended weekly staff meetings and reviewed the center's archived materials to better understand how the center works with the agricultural community to improve the wellbeing of farmers and farm workers. In addition, I conducted interviews with about 20 health and safety professionals and researchers about farmer distress in the region, presented a poster based on my research in Slovenia at the Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health Conference in November (2022), and attended agricultural field days and the Iowa Organic Conference. We both expect-

³ Since 2020, for the first time, projects directly addressing the farmer distress have been implemented in Slovenia: two research projects, Response of Farming Families to the Consequences of Accidents at Work and Occupational Diseases (2020-2022; code: V5-2028), Changes in Agriculture through the Farmers' Eyes and Bodies (2020-2024; code: J6-2577), and the European Commission's Erasmus+ program POWERlessness of Rural Areas (2020-2021), implemented by the Slovenian Rural Youth Association.

⁴ The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

ed that all of these activities and exchanges would contribute significantly to current incentives of introducing the farmers' wellbeing programme in Slovenia.

A brief visit by me, Brandi, to Slovenia in June 2023 included public presentations on efforts in Iowa to address farmer distress and agricultural health, a meeting with researchers from the Research Center of Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts to provide details about I-CASH's operational strategies for working with farmers that might be appropriate for the Slovenian context, and meetings with Slovenian farmers and other agricultural stakeholders to better understand concerns about agricultural distress and health in Slovenia. Despite the short visit, I was able to travel with Duška throughout Slovenia to get a sense of the picturesque landscape where people farm: from the coast to the Karst to the hills and mountain slopes. I was told that in Slovenia, about two-thirds of farms are located in so-called OMD areas—areas with limited opportunities for agricultural activities. At the Research Center, I talked with researchers about my more than 15 years of doing ethnographic research in farming communities in the state of Iowa. In a presentation titled *“Good luck with your research, I hope you find what you're looking for:” Lessons learned from Iowa farmers*, I described how different types of farmers interact with each other and with other types of farming practices, how policy and family relationships affect farming decisions, and how farmers engage with federally funded research. We also talked about building community partnerships to promote health and wellbeing in agriculture, the burden of mental health and suicide in agriculture, and the structure of I-CASH and other initiatives in the United States. In the days that followed, I met with representatives from farm organizations (Rural Youth and Farmers' Union), the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry, and the Ministry of Agriculture, and gave a presentation entitled *US policy and farmers' health and wellbeing*. I also participated in a Zoom call with the Rural Youth members. During these discussions, I learned more about what they do and how they connect with farmers and were able to share resources and information about I-CASH and other U.S. initiatives, and their feedback helped me understand the context of agriculture in Slovenia.

While our collaboration is still in its early stages, we are optimistic about the potential for a productive long-term relationship. Much remains to be done to meaningfully reduce farm hardship, but we hope to contribute new insights and knowledge by expanding our cross-cultural collaboration and further engaging social scientists, particularly anthropologists, in the field of agricultural safety and health. To that end, the essays collected below from authors we met on this bilateral trip are the first and not the last step toward this collaborative effort.

What the articles say?

Janssen and McCabe's article on understanding the mental health of farmers in Iowa demonstrates once again the importance of discussing the root causes of the problem when evaluating the various solutions. Considering the broader narrative of farmer suicide in the Midwestern United States, including media reports, federal programs, and stakeholder meetings held in the state of Iowa, the authors argue that the focus that has largely been on counseling and mental health services for farmers since the 1980s farm crisis does not address the sources of farmer distress beyond an individual behavior. Furthermore, they believe that the cultural emphasis on independence and individualism in rural areas, and among farmers in particular, absolves lenders, agribusiness, and policy makers of their role in creating agricultural structures and practices that contribute to poor farmer mental health. Rather than addressing farmers' independence from the market or control over their own operations or commodity price structures, policies continue to focus on expanding mental health services and extension programs that place responsibility for their plight on the farmers themselves.

Increased attention to mental health, including suicide, in agriculture has led to an increase in interventions not only in the United States but globally. In their article on the study of suicide in agriculture on a global scale, Florence A. Becot, Sara Kohlbeck, and Sarah Ruszkowski address the question of what knowledge underlies these interventions. Their ambitious scoping review of the literature focuses on the structure, methods and assumptions of such studies. Considering research design and the social determinants of mental disorders, the authors point out that the prevailing approaches in agricultural suicide research are methodologically predominantly quantitative and overemphasize individual factors at the expense of structural, particularly social and cultural factors. These and similar gaps identified in the review point to the inadequacy of existing interventions. The authors offer further critical reflections on the current approaches to the literature review itself in the final two sections, where the reader learns about the avenues they suggest for future research and the potential of anthropological knowledge for understanding the phenomena involved and its contribution to better-informed interventions.

Article by Klataske and Ramos on the wellbeing of cattle feedyard immigrant workers in the Great Plains region of the United States focuses on their managers' strategies to improve their safety and health and keep them on their feedyards. Due to sweeping structural changes in American agriculture in recent decades, cattle ranching operations have become increasingly dependent on migrant laborers who face various physical, mental,

emotional, and social distresses associated with their work. The authors discuss the social and cultural dimensions of feedyard work safety and health provided by the managers who in their strategies go beyond rules, protocols, or training on occupational safety and aim to create a sense of community, belonging, and kinship. The authors show how the ritual of eating together (commensality), the respect shown by managers, and the treatment of an immigrant worker as a human being and family member enhance important dimensions of safety culture.

The last two articles deal with the Slovenian context of farmers' wellbeing. How farmers themselves reflect on the main sources of their embodied fears is conveyed in the article by Knežević Hočevar and Slovinc Grasselli. The authors offer a brief historical description of the radical changes in Slovenian agriculture before and after the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia in 1991 and integration into the European Union in 2004 to explain a context that has shaped the numerous opportunities for farmers to advance their businesses but also their uncertainty as a lived experience of constant pressure and worry. Drawing on some theorizations of moral economy, the authors show how farmers' narratives of the main causes of their plight are interwoven with farmers' reflections on insecurity, guilt, and responsibility for their experience of not being well.

In contrast to the numerous policies introduced in the United States to alleviate farmer distress, farmer wellbeing is rarely recognized as an important issue by Slovenian stakeholders. Šprah and Černič Istenič's article provides reflections on the need for health statistics in Slovenian agriculture as a prerequisite for introducing more systematic monitoring of farmers' and farm workers' health and, consequently, more targeted interventions to address their suffering. The reader will learn whether the owners and administrators of national health databases and other representatives of various governmental and non-governmental agricultural organizations are interested in health statistics about people who farm, and what circumstances are necessary to ensure the quality of data collection, as well as the benefits of such data for farmers and farm workers themselves.

Concluding remark

The articles in this special issue of the journal continue the anthropological contributions on suffering and interventions in agriculture. They mostly draw on ethnographic approaches that pay close attention to the experiences of people who farm and live in specific social and institutional contexts. However, it remains a challenge to maintain this methodological rigor in the research field of agricultural mental health, as the theoretical and empirical debates are largely conducted outside of anthropology. Even though some

of the authors of these collected essays are not anthropologists, we all share an important lesson that Thu (2017) elaborated so well in his commentary on the intersection of anthropology and agricultural health: cultural understanding is not a prerequisite for successful interventions, but the absence of such understanding certainly increases the likelihood of failure.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Povzetek

Posebna številka z naslovom *Življenje v kontrastnih kmetijskih svetovih, a doživljanje podobnih skrbi* je eden od rezultatov bilateralnega znanstvenega sodelovanja med Slovenijo in ZDA med letoma 2022 in 2024, katerega namen je skupni razmislek o tem, kako se soočiti s stiskami ljudi, ki kmetujejo. Kljub kontrastnim kmetijskim svetovom so kmetje in delavci na kmetijah v obeh državah izpostavljeni podobnim megatrendom in pritiskom moderniziranega kmetijstva, kar se odraža v pojavu prekomernega stresa in smrti zaradi samomora. Raziskovalci iz ameriškega Srednjega zahoda in Slovenije v svojih prispevkih bralca seznanijo tudi s kontrastnimi raziskovalnimi tradicijami in posegi v reševanje prekomernega stresa v kmetijstvu in s tem, zakaj pomanjkanje kulturnega razumevanja tega pojava povečuje verjetnost neuspeha prevladujočih zdravstvenih intervencij.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: dvostransko znanstveno sodelovanje med Slovenijo in ZDA, prekomerni stres v kmetijstvu, raziskovalne tradicije, zdravstvene intervencije

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