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The Effects of Collective Trauma on Iowa Farmers, their Communities, and Sustainability Outcomes

Background and Justification

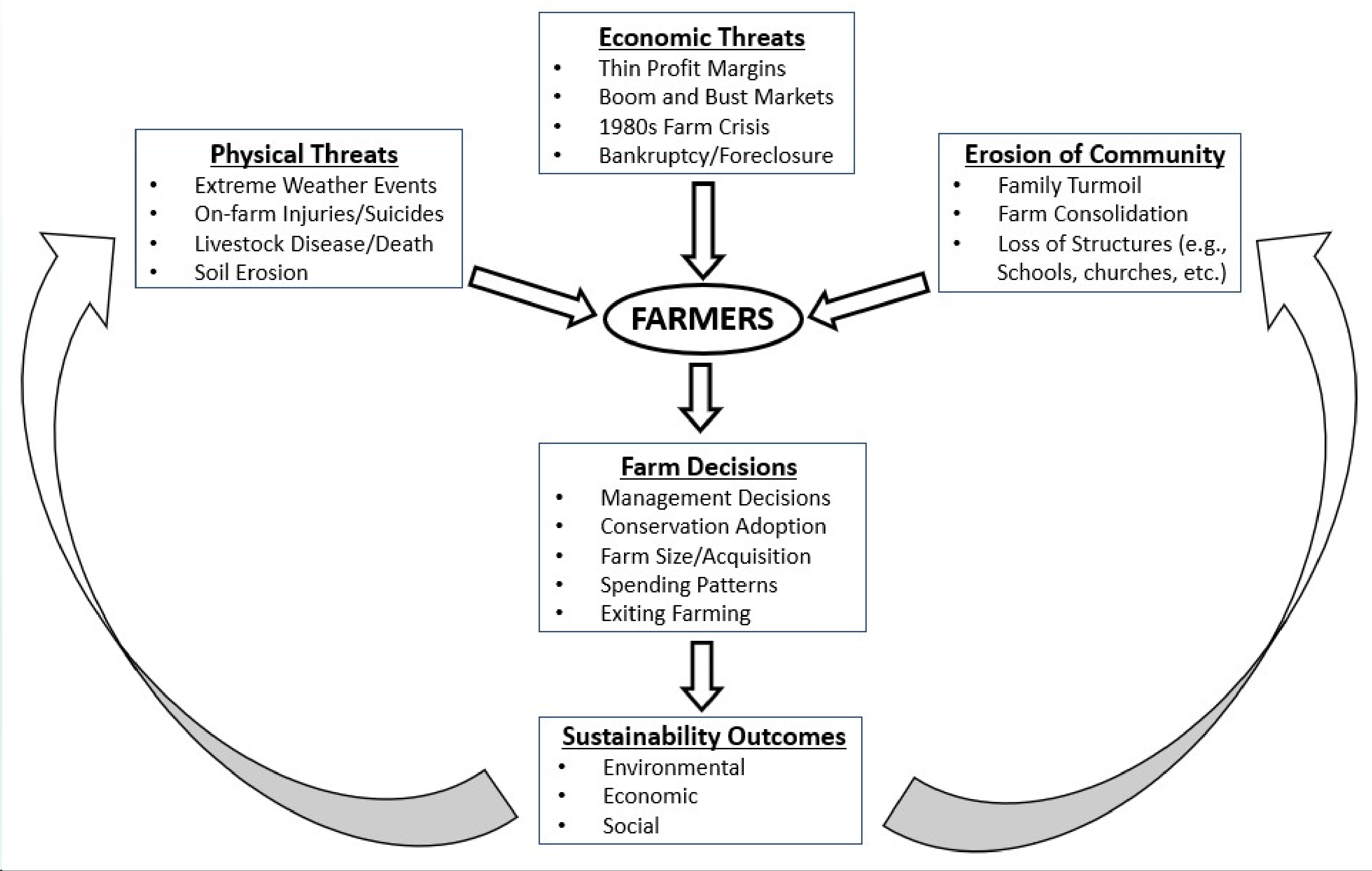
Collective trauma refers to the psychological effects that are experienced by a group of people in response to shared traumatic events (Erikson 1978). Farmers represent a unique population that is chronically exposed to potentially traumatic events particular to the agricultural industry. Farming communities in Iowa have experienced events such as:

- The 1980s Farm Crisis
- Floods, droughts, tornados, derechos, and climate change
- Soil loss, water quality, and water quantity issues
- Rapidly fluctuating input costs and “boom and bust” commodity markets
- Farm bankruptcies, foreclosures, and consolidation/loss of community structure
- High rates of on-farm injury and farmer suicides

**Research Gap:** Exposure to such events can potentially have dramatic effects on the people who experience them and the communities they live in. While research exists examining the behavioral health aspects of stress in farmers, no studies have examined the lived experiences of farmers within the framework of collective trauma. Understanding collective trauma in farmers can therefore potentially aid agricultural policymakers in developing trauma-informed farm policy (Bowen and Murshid 2016) and can help conservation professionals better understand how such experiences affect farmer decisions and sustainability outcomes.



Figure 1. A theoretical framework of collective trauma among Iowa farmers.



Erosion of Community

[...] we had what I would say a pretty thriving town. And today it's just a shell of what it was [...] by the early '90s, many of the local businesses, the lumber yard, a lot of the hardware store, they closed up because there just wasn't business there or people were leaving. There's less money from the farming community. [...] A lot of small towns just really did dry up. (Central Iowa Farmer 3)

Effects on Decision Making

Well, obviously they may make a little bit more rash decisions, maybe they sell a product a little bit too soon or a little bit too late, hold out for the price to go up and it doesn't. And if they make a decision based on emotion instead of rationalization...then they may not get the profit they are looking for [...] (Behavioral Health Expert 1)

Usually when there's hard times you bite the bullet. Like I said, you don't overspend. You don't buy new capital. You don't increase. You just maintain until the output comes...get by with as little as you could and still maintaining a good crop. (SE Iowa Farmer 2)

It's a mindset. The people thinking long-range were willing to do conservation things, even if it had possible money out their pocket. With the people that didn't, you could just see them rape the farm. (SE Iowa Farmer 2).

I think the biggest result of all of this has been that a lot of farms have passed out of families, and that young people long ago decided they weren't going to do this. (Behavioral Health Expert 2)

Conclusions

- Iowa farmers and their communities have experienced events and conditions that are potentially traumatic.
- These include physical threats, economic threats, and erosion of rural farming communities.
- These traumatic experiences have tangible effects on farmer decisions regarding farm management, spending patterns, conservation adoption, farm size, and whether or not to remain in farming.
- These decisions then in turn have effects on environmental, economic, and social sustainability outcomes, creating a feedback loop by influencing the next iteration of potentially traumatic threats.

References

Bowen, E. and Murshid, N. 2016. Trauma-informed social policy: A conceptual framework for policy analysis and advocacy. *American journal of public health*, 106(2), pp.223-229.  
Erikson, K. 1976. *Everything in its path*. Simon and Schuster.



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**Data Collection:**  
19 Semi-structured, in-depth interviews

**Methods**

**Data Analysis:**  
Grounded Theory

**Participants:**  
4 Behavioral Health Experts  
15 Iowa Farmers

Results

Conceptualizing Farmer Collective Trauma

In the agricultural context, stress is the norm. Farmers are always stressed by the weather, by markets, by what's happening in Washington [...] Trauma is something that threatens, for them, something that threatens the existence of their farm. Trauma is interest rates being raised to 20% and more, and they have huge debts. Trauma is a spring that is so wet that their calves are literally drowning in the mud. Trauma is the flood that threatens the existence of their farm or the drought that goes on so long that they can't see the other side [...] Trauma is the moment when you look at the situation and you think, 'I don't know how to get out of this.' (Behavioral Health Expert 2)

If you'd walk away, you'd be walking away from all that history and effort that everyone else put in to get it to this point [...] I look at the previous generations like, 'Okay. Am I going to be the one that feasibly can't bring in the next [generation]?' (Central Iowa Farmer 4)

Physical Threats

I mean, that [happened with the] derecho, or we've had a couple other weather scares, and it'll rile me up for a day or two. To the point where I'll be up most of the night and just can't handle it for a day or two [...] Every time there's a thunderstorm or a hailstorm coming. (SE Iowa Farmer 3)

Economic Threats

My dad was current on the loan, but the bank wanted to call in the loan because they wanted the capital. So they were trying to foreclose on him. He was all depressed or whatever and was contemplating suicide or thought about ways he could do it to get the insurance and whatever. Luckily, he didn't do it. So yeah, I mean the '80s was a financially hard time that way for my folks. (SE Iowa Farmer 1)