

Running head: Farm women

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL MEANINGS AND  
PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTHERN MANITOBA FARM WOMEN'S  
STRESS EXPERIENCES

SIMONE MARIE JEANNETTE REINSCH

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master in Nursing

Faculty of Nursing

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

Stress is a pervasive issue that can potentially affect health and productivity. There is evidence to suggest that farm women are particularly susceptible to the effects of stress. The overall purpose of the study was to arrive at an increased understanding of the underlying cultural knowledge and meaning of Manitoba farm women's stress experiences. Situated in Social Critical Theory, the study's conceptual framework was guided by Socialist Feminist Theory (SFT). Qualitative ethnographic face-to-face interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of eight farm women whose livelihood was affected by Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis (BSE). The ethnographic central theme describes the aggregate as women who struggle to balance the sense of self in a patriarchal context, while struggling to survive the micro and macro changing times in agriculture following the BSE outbreak. The central theme is supported by four taxonomies. The study has shown that the root causes of the aggregate's culturally defined stress experience are situated in the socio-economic-political changing times in the agricultural industry at the local, national, and global levels. As such, all levels of government should adopt the Population Health Promotion approach to policy development. Future research includes the exploration of the long-term impacts and implication of crisis situations on farm men and women in various farming operations both provincially and nationally, and exploring the importance of home to farm women's well-being.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my husband Richard,

AND

My three daughters:

Arianne, Josee, & Emma

*'Learning is a life long journey'*



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## CHAPTER ONE

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM, PURPOSE, AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The contents of this chapter will include a brief statement of the problem, research purpose, research question, definition of key terms, foundational assumptions, and the significance of the study.

## Statement of the Problem

Stress is a pervasive issue that can potentially affect all aspects of society but specifically it may affect health and productivity (Lobley, Johnson & Reed, 2004; Lyon, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that farm women in particular may be especially susceptible to the effects of stress (Kubik & Moore, 2001; Walker & Walker, 1988).

A landmark Manitoba study by Walker and Walker (1988) found that farm women reported a higher level of symptoms commonly associated with stress in comparison to farm men. As well, an Alberta study of farm stress involving farm men and women found that predictors of stress may be gender, and environment specific (Thurston, Blundell-Gosselin, & Rose, 2003). The reason for these differences remains unclear. Little is known about how Canadian farm women perceive, define and live with stress. A paucity of Canadian stress research initiatives focusing specifically on vulnerable women and, to a greater extent, farm women, is apparent.

The study aimed to broaden the knowledge of the unique cultural attributes that shape women's stress experiences on the farm. Guided by socialist feminist theory, farm women's testimonies, as experts of their lived realities of

stress, was central to the study. A qualitative study using a mini-ethnographic research design captured the cultural meanings of how women think, believe, and behave within the current farming context.

#### Research Purpose

The overall purpose of this ethnographic inquiry was to arrive at an increased understanding of the underlying cultural knowledge and meaning of the stress experiences of farm women who live in Manitoba. Using the lens of the feminist perspective, the study focused on women's 'lived through' and felt stress experiences on the farm.

#### Research Question

The researcher sought to discover and understand answers to a broad and central question. What cultural knowledge guided Manitoba farm women in conceptualizing their stress experiences?

#### Definition of Key Terms

Creswell (2003) suggests that because of the inductive and evolving nature of a qualitative study, key terms should be tentatively defined (Creswell, 2003). In fact, Creswell (2003) suggests themes that evolve, and emerge through the data analysis should define the phenomenon under study. This approach necessitates that definition of terms should be delayed until entry into the field setting.

However, words in every day language have multiple meanings.

For the sake of precision and uniformity of meaning, keywords were defined and grounded in the literature. Keywords include: *culture, farm, farm woman, and stress.*

*Culture*, the central phenomenon of study was defined as the patterns of behaviour and beliefs that shape the daily lives of people over a representative period of time or at a given moment (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

*Farm* according to Statistics Canada (2001) was defined as an agricultural operation that produces a product (crops, livestock, poultry, green house or nursery products, mushrooms, sod, honey, ample syrup products, Christmas trees) intended for sale.

*Farm woman* was defined as a woman who operates a farm and or is married to a farm operator, regardless of age (Statistic Canada, 1999). A farm operator is a person responsible for the day-to-day management decisions while operating a farm (Statistic Canada, 1999).

*Stress* was broadly defined using Seyle's (1976) definition. According to Seyle (1976) *stress* was a threat to a person's well-being. Definitions for stress, and stress experience emerged through data analysis.

#### Assumptions

The identification of personal assumptions is a reflexive activity that is meant to control personal bias from potentially infiltrating the research findings (Speziale, 2003). The following assumptions are presented to ensure confirmability of the research findings.

The researcher's lived realities of farm life and the synthesis of a comprehensive literature review have provided the foundation for the following assumptions:



1. The farm 'way-of-life' reality is patriarchal, oppressive, and exploitive of women's labour.
2. Farm women are experts of their own experiences with stress. Their experiences as human beings are valid and must be understood.
3. Farm women's stress experiences cannot be understood by eviscerating the parts from the whole
4. A guided and photovoice-based interview may provide the pathway to access women's ideas, thoughts, and stories about their stress experiences.
5. Farm women's stress experiences may be caused by the interplay of many factors outside the individual's control (determinants).

#### Significance of the study

According to Creswell (2003) significance refers to the rationale of the study for the select audience. The study has significance for farm women, service providers, policy makers, researchers and educators.

This study is important to farm women in Manitoba because their lived experiences of stress had not been documented using a qualitative design. The research legitimized women's stress experiences, and raised consciousness of what was normally hidden. Raising awareness may be instrumental to empowerment education for the farm women who participated in this study. In so doing, these farm women will have a stronger voice to influence their social, cultural, and political situations on the farm, and in their communities.

Knowledge gleaned from the study will assist the staff of the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line (MFRSL) in meeting the specific priority needs of

farm women. Rural and farm women have expressed a desire to have cultural sensitive programming (Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, 2003). However, there is a paucity of literature on what that actually means. Findings from this study will enlighten health service providers such as rural family physicians and public health nurses, and other service providers (i.e. church, and other community groups) to provide services that meet the needs of farm women. Knowledge and understanding of the aggregate's needs may facilitate health promotion strategies within a primary health model.

The researcher hopes the findings from this study may influence policy makers. In the past, stress had been viewed through a narrow biomedical lens. The stress experience and subsequent health and behaviour problems have been viewed as an individual's failure to cope. It is hoped that this study will enlighten the policy makers to understand how the determinants of health play a role in the development of stress at the aggregate level. The knowledge gleaned may also equip women's groups such as the Prairie Women's Centre for Excellence (PWHCE), and the Manitoba Women's Institute (MWI) with essential information to speak on behalf of farm women in relation to 'upstream' policy development.

Lastly, new insights emerging from this study may help to guide researchers and educators concerned with advancing the development, and knowledge translation of farm women's cultural experiences of stress.

### Summary

There is evidence to suggest that farm women may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of stress. However, the available literature did not explicate the reasons for this phenomenon. The researcher's personal and literature based reflexive assumptions were identified. The assumptions provided the foundation for the development of the research purpose and question. Key concept terms were defined. The rationale for the study was given. The study is expected to benefit farm women and other key stakeholders. The following chapter will present a review of the literature.

## CHAPTER TWO

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A literature review was undertaken to inform, focus, and identify gaps in the area of the proposed qualitative study (Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). An extensive search was done using different search words including: farm woman, stress, and Canada. The reviewed literature was narrowed to include primarily Canadian sources of any date, and recent research from other countries during a fifteen year period beginning in 1990 until 2005.

A computer generated literature search including CINHALL, MEDLINE, and GOOGLE SCHOLAR was conducted and revealed diverse disciplinary (medicine, social work, sociology, psychology) approaches to the study of stress within rural and farm individuals and families. The quality and integrity of online resources was evaluated according to the guidelines outlined in Berg (2004). Various online Canadian federal and provincial health and statistical government documents, and current provincial and local newspaper articles were accessed. Manual retrieval of dated Canadian literature including books, periodicals, and smaller agency publications was also conducted.

In addition, as part of a Community Health Course Practicum, some insights were obtained through informal interviews with key informants from specific agencies, and rural women's groups. The Director and staff of the Manitoba Farm and Rural Stress Line, the President of the Manitoba Women's Institute, the Director of the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence in Winnipeg, a Home Economist with the Southwest Farm Women's Network, a

Family Living Specialist with the Department of Agriculture, the Chief Officer of Health for the Regional Health Authority-Central Region, and the past President of the Keystone Agricultural Producers were interviewed. The literature review and key informant interviews provided an overview of the experiences of farm women and stress. The areas specifically addressed in this literature review include: stress theories, rural context, profile of farm women, and farm women and the stress experience.

### Review of Stress Theories

Stress literature abounds within various disciplines (medicine, psychology, nursing, and sociology). However it remains a broad, ill-defined, and evolving concept that is frequently used by laypeople, professionals, and academics alike. The two main influential approaches to stress research are response and stimulus based models (Bailey & Clarke, 1989). A review of the most influential stress theories (Table 1) informed the researcher's own interpretation and understanding of stress.

Although not an illness in itself, stress has been perceived as a factor that may precipitate and aggravate disease (American Psychiatric Association, 2004). Seyle's (1956) definition of stress (Table I, p. 19) clearly represents a biomedical illness-based approach to the study of stress. In his operational definition, it is assumed that a universal and patterned response for all stressors will occur regardless of the nature of the stressor, the individual's adaptive abilities, and social context (Seyle, 1976). Identification of the individual's physiological manifestations of stress remains at the core of this theory.

The authors of the Transactional Stress Theory (TST) expanded the stress definition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) indicate that the basis for TST involves an interaction between the demands placed on the person, their appraisal of an event, and subsequent ability to cope. Stress is seen as a subjective experience. Ineffective coping results in psychological stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This view of stress assumes the individual as being responsible for ineffective coping, which may result in victim-blaming (Cornish & Gerrard, 1995).

Aneshensel (1992) when developing the Social Stress Theory, took into consideration the impacts of socio-economic class and the development of individual stress. Although the Social Stress Theory presents a broader context of people's lives as a potential stressor the theory still focuses on the individual's capacity to cope within their environment (Lobley, Johnson & Reed, 2004). The reviewed stress theories showed varying definitions of stress. Differing definitions of stress and subjective nature of the stress experience added a challenging dimension to the interpretation and comparison of stress research. The implied nuances when comparing the different models were difficult to discern. However, recurrent themes were identifiable. The themes included: a host; a force; processes; a stress response; and a consequence of the response (Table II). The main stress themes provided the foundation for the identification of domains while in the field, and during the preliminary data analysis (Appendix O).

Table I: *Stress Theories*

Stress theory	Description
<p>Hans Seyle (1956, 1976, 1993)            General Adaptation Syndrome:            Nervous and endocrine systems are the masterminds of the body's stress response. Failure and/or exhaustion of the systems may result in disease (Seyle, 1956).</p>	<p>Operational definition:            "the state of stress by the measurable manifestation of the stress syndrome" (Seyle 1976, p. 64)            Stress definition: "the nonspecific (that is common) result of any demand upon the body, be the effect mental or somatic" (Seyle, 1993, p.7)</p>
<p>Lazarus &amp; Folkman (1984)            Transactional Stress Theory (TST): The response is a subjective phenomenon influenced by cognitive appraisal (threat, harm, and challenges), emotions, and coping responses</p>	<p>Stress definition: "a rubric consisting of many variable and processes" ( p.12).            Stressors may include: daily hassles, major changes affecting one or few persons            Psychological stress occurs when coping fails.</p>
<p>Aneshensel, 1992            Social Stress Theory: a state of arousal resulting either from the presence of socio-environmental demands that tax the individual's ordinary adaptive capacity</p>	<p>Stress definition: "Discrepancies between those conditions and characteristics of the individual his needs, values , perception, resource and skills"(p. 16).</p>

Table 11: *The stress concept—Foundation to domain identification*

Host	Forces	Processes	Stress Responses	Consequences of response
Biologic Genetic Gender Age Education Reactivity Nutrition Fitness Level Health Status	Internal External Determinants of health	Appraisal/Perception Coping/Adaptation	Stabilizing Emotions Physical	Cognitive Physical Behavioral Disease

Consistently, throughout the diverse theories, the individual is central to the discussion. Patterns of commonalities within and between groups or aggregates have not been identified. Gerrard (2000b) believes that the determinants of health were in part responsible for the development of stress on the farm in Saskatchewan. Determinants are factors outside the health care system that contribute to the health of a population (Hamilton & Bhatti, 1996). Determinants include the social, economic, and political context in which people live. In such, alleviation, and/or reduction of stress may need to have a broader aggregate level focus. Context appears to be crucial in understanding the farm stress experience. This broad view of the stress experience is not explicated within the current stress theories and thus provided the basis for Assumption 5.



## Rural Context

Rural and farm populations share common and unique characteristics even though the term rural has variable meanings. The choice of definition depends on the policy and geographic issues being addressed (Mitura & Bollman, 2003). In Canada, there is a lack of consensus in defining 'rural'. Statistics Canada defines 'census rural' as those areas that have less than 1000 people living within a population density of less than 400 people per square kilometre (du Plessis, et al., 2001).

duPlessis, Behiri, Bollman and Clemenson (2001) identify six definitions of rural. Definitions may be based on the census rural area, rural and small town (RST), the organization of economic co-operation and development (OECD) of rural communities, the non-metropolitan regions (Beale Code approach), and rural postal codes. These authors suggest that the selection of a rural definition may have an impact on research results, policy development and application, program administration, and fund distribution. Ryan-Nicholls and Racher (2004) clearly articulate the importance of defining rural accurately in order to appropriately discuss health of rural communities. The lack of a consensus in defining rural among researchers is a critical issue in research as it makes comparisons of existing findings a challenge (Ryan-Nicholls & Racher, 2004).

In Manitoba and across Canada the number of farms has decreased in number while rural and small town populations have increased (Racher, 2001). Statistics Canada (2005) reports the number of farms has decreased by 13.6 %, and as a result the farming population has decreased by 14.7%. Agriculture is a

primary industry providing income and employment for many rural and urban dwellers (Government of Manitoba, 2004). Farming areas are characterized by lower population density, greater spatial distances between people and services, economic orientation to land and nature, and work and recreational activities that are seasonal in nature (Bushy, 1994). The setting for the study was Manitoba farms.

### Profile of the Farm Woman

According to Statistics Canada (2005) farm women represent approximately 1/5 of the total Manitoba female population. In absolute numbers, there are approximately 20,000 Manitoba women aged 18 and over who are farm residents, and/or derive farm based income. However, the exact number may be even higher, as many farm women identify themselves by their professional and role designation rather than as a farmer. The present day Canadian farm women is likely to be between the ages of 35-54 (Statistics Canada, 2004), married with children, have off-farm paid employment, have a high level of education in comparison to their spouse, and are less likely than in the past to participate in rural women's networking organizations (Martz & Brueckner, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2005b).

Statistical analyses of Manitoba Farm & Rural Stress Line (MFRSL) (2003) calls revealed a 195% increase in call volume since the program's 2001 inception. Within the past two years the majority of callers have been rural women between the ages of 51-64 followed by ages 36-50 years. Rural women below the age of 36 are having the least contact with the MFRSL even though the

literature suggests younger women are at higher risk for experiencing elevated levels of stress symptoms (Walker & Walker, 1987). The problems identified by the stress line callers included: anxiety, isolation, medical and mental health issues, followed by relationship, financial concerns, and depression. Statistics of the problem areas do not differentiate between male and female, and rural and farm residents. As a result, the extent and nature of issues facing farm women was not accurately identified.

Rural and farm women share common experiences and characteristics. Some characteristics, however, are unique to people who farm. The ensuing discussion is intended to situate the farm woman aggregate within a broader social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political context. The specific social location of the knower is important to research because how one 'acts and knows' is always dependent on social structures or context (Ardovini-Brooker, 2002). Context is defined as diverse elements that "influence the behaviour and beliefs of individuals" (Kleinman, 1992, p.19). The interpretation of context "shapes what is known and what is not known" (Ardovini-Brooker, 2002, p. 4). Specifically health concerns, socio-cultural values and beliefs, functional capacity, farm families, farming, economic sustainability, and agricultural government policies will be presented.

### *Health Concerns*

Once considered idyllic and peaceful, the realities of rural Canada show a different image (Jennissen, 1992). Jennissen (1992) identified availability and access to quality health care in rural areas and the difficulties of meeting the needs

of women, children, youth, disabled persons, immigrants, elderly people, and certain groups (farmers, Aboriginal peoples, and fishermen) were prominent health issues in rural Canada. Specifically, there was increasing evidence that rural communities were facing demographic, ecological, economic, and social problems due to geographic isolation, depletion of natural resources, chronic high unemployment, depopulation and aging population, as well as environmental decay (Pitblado, et al., 1999). The Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (PWHCE) (2003) indicates women in rural and remote areas were currently more likely to be: isolated, poor, and unemployed; and to die accidentally (motor vehicle accident [MVA], poisonings, and suicide) or from disease (cancer and diabetes) as compared to their urban counterparts.

Considerable urban/rural differences in health status, behaviour, and service use have been identified (Pitblado, et al., 1999). Rural (male and female) populations have shorter life expectancy, higher infant mortality rates, fewer physician contacts, and have a preference for institutionalized care (Pitblado, et al., 1999). Mitura and Bollman (2003) noted that residents of rural and northern regions were less likely to rate their health as very good to excellent in comparison to the national average. Such was the case with rural and farm women across the Canadian prairies (Donner, 2001; Kubik & Moore, 2001; Roberts & Falk, 2004; Thurston & Meadows, 2003).

Rural depopulation leading to fewer social supports and regionalization of health services (Kubik & Moore, 2001; Roberts & Falk, 2002) were having deleterious effects on women's well-being. Roberts and Falk (2002) found South-

eastern Manitoba women often lack knowledge and information, and have difficulty with communication in what is perceived as an insensitive, inflexible, and inaccessible health system. In fact, rural and farm women felt the health care system organization did not benefit rural women (Roberts & Falk, 2002; Thurston, Blundell-Gosselin, & Vollman, 2003). Quality care, accessibility (distance and travelling), and availability of cultural and gender specific services were recurrent farm and rural health care concerns (Kubik & Moore, 2001; PWHCE, 2003). Gerrard (2000b) indicates rural community, and health care systems may impair (lack of privacy, and confidentiality), and enhance resiliency (long term friendships, informal and formal supports).

The PWHCE (2003), the Manitoba Women's Institute (Manitoba Agriculture & Food, 2001), the Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network (Gerrard & Russell, 2004), and the Southwest Farm Women's Network (Manitoba Agriculture & Food, 2003) concur that formal and informal support systems for women in rural communities were dwindling. Effects specific to the erosion of formal support programs may lead to women feeling unsupported, invisible, voiceless, isolated, angry, and ineffective in their many roles (Gerrard & Russell, 1999).

#### *Socio-Cultural Values and Beliefs*

American farm women have unique ways of understanding health, which may have affected their health and health seeking behaviours (Long, 1993). American literature points to distinctive rural socio-cultural values and beliefs including: slower changing traditional cultural values, preference of informal

supports such as family, friends, and community members, reluctance and distrust to seek help from others, and a preference to interact with known people who share similar views (Bushy, 1990). There is evidence to suggest that Saskatchewan farm residents shared similar values and beliefs (Gerrard, 2000).

Results of a qualitative farm stress community assessment of Saskatchewan farmers and service providers found participants have a strong sense of individualism (Gerrard, 2000). Individualism was defined as the tendency to internalize and assume responsibility for problems (Gerrard, 2000). Participants identified a distrust of governments, and service providers. The way-of-life' was seen as being paternalistic, where females were the least empowered in a male dominated culture. Participants were noted as having a strong sense of living for the future. Gerrard (2000) aptly referred, to this characteristic, as "a religion of hope" (p. 92). The author did not specify the gender of the farmers interviewed therefore it is impossible to generalize the results to women.

While doing a resiliency study in Saskatchewan, Gerrard (2000b) found that rural gender barriers such as sex-role stereotypes, lack of opportunities for women, traditional male/female roles, lack of communication opportunities, and 'gender politics' were obstacles faced by women in farming. One Saskatchewan farm women was quoted as saying "The agricultural sector walks like a man, talks like a man and is a man in every way" (Gerrard & Russell, 1999, p. 5). This quote clearly illustrates the 'felt' patriarchy in farming.

In the Canadian prairie provinces, rural and farm women have defined health more holistically (physical, mental, spiritual, and social aspects) than their