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Authors	Gorman, Eoin;Kingston, Sally;Giles, Nicola
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Irish-based farmers' experience of facilitating social farming

Eoin Gorman, Sally Kingston and Nicola Giles

Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Abstract

Purpose – Social farming is the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes to promote mental and physical health for service users through ordinary farming activities. While previous research has focused on the service user, the farmer's perspective and well-being has not been extensively considered in the research. The purpose of this study was to explore Irish-based farmer's experiences of social farming.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative-descriptive approach was used to explore the form, function and meaning of facilitating social farming. Purposive sampling was used for recruitment. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten social farmers.

Findings – Four themes emerged from the interviews: characteristics of the farm and farmer, connection, mutually beneficial farming and challenges of social farming.

Originality/value – This study sheds light on the experience of occupational rejuvenation that occurs for the farmer and their family through engagement in social farming, seen through their renewed passion for farming and the focus on mundane occupations. This highlights how the occupation of facilitating social farming can increase the well-being of those involved in the occupation.

Keywords Mental health, Farmers, Occupational science, Social farming

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social farming is, “the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes to promote mental and physical health through ordinary farming activities” for service users (Hine *et al.*, 2008 in Fieldhouse and Sempik, 2014, p. 312). It is an occupation which is built on the idea of multifunctional agriculture, combining various aspects of agriculture with healthcare services in the community (Borgi *et al.*, 2020; Stock and Brickell, 2013). Research across the disciplines has shown benefits of social farming for a range of service users, including those with mental health difficulties, intellectual disabilities, autism and older adults (Elsey *et al.*, 2016; Leck *et al.*, 2015; Murray *et al.*, 2019). Service users go on placements to social farms for a fixed amount of time with activities facilitated by the farmers, including animal care and horticulture. Elsey *et al.* (2016) outlined the potential value of social farming in the mental health sector as an intervention for service users and, internationally, social farming has been encouraged as a means to outsource mental health services in the community and develop collaborative models of care (Borgi *et al.*, 2020; García-Llorente *et al.*, 2018; Iancu *et al.*, 2014).

Much of the literature on social farming has focused on service users' experience of social farming, highlighting that engagement in social farming benefits service users. The authentic farm environment that farmers provide was shown to be a valued aspect from the service users perspective

(Borgi *et al.*, 2020; Murray *et al.*, 2019; Pedersen *et al.*, 2015b), with contact with nature identified as calming (Hassink *et al.*, 2010; Murray *et al.*, 2019; Pedersen *et al.*, 2015a; Westre *et al.*, 2015). Service users appreciated that activities performed were purposeful (Pedersen *et al.*, 2015a; Sudmann, 2018), and within an established routine developed by the farmer (Iancu *et al.*, 2014; Kaley *et al.*, 2019; Murray *et al.*, 2019) where work tasks were adapted to the service user's ability (Hassink *et al.*, 2010; Iancu *et al.*, 2015). Through engagement in meaningful work, the service user's mental health was generally shown to be positively impacted through a decrease in depression, anxiety and stress (Elsey *et al.*, 2016; Iancu *et al.*, 2015; Leck *et al.*, 2015; Pedersen *et al.*, 2015b), as well as an increase in mental well-being (Rotheram *et al.*, 2017). The farmer is

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The authors would like to thank Social Farming Ireland, and the social farmers who participated in the study.

Data availability statement: Due to the limited participant population, the data that support the study findings may be made available from the corresponding author, [Au1], upon reasonable request.

Author contributions: All authors conceptualised the study, developed the research protocol and applied for ethical approval. [Au2] and [Au3] organised data collection and completed the analysis. All authors interpreted the findings and were involved in preparing the manuscript.

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embedded in facilitating these benefits for the service users through social interaction and teaching new skills (Pedersen *et al.*, 2015b).

Engaging in social farming can lead to the formation of a social community as the relationship between the farmer and the service users can be meaningful and foster a sense of connection and belonging (Ellingsen-Dalskau *et al.*, 2016; Kaley *et al.*, 2019; Pedersen *et al.*, 2015b). Sudmann (2018) and Hassink *et al.* (2010) identified that service users valued the farmers' non-judgemental approach and being seen as a person rather than a patient. Indeed, Anderson *et al.* (2017) and Iancu *et al.* (2015) showed that service users felt so welcomed that they felt like part of the farmers' family. Farmers are fundamental in facilitating social farming and the surrounding environments, demonstrating a caring and supportive nature in their facilitation (Hassink *et al.*, 2010; Leck *et al.*, 2015).

While service users are the primary focus of social farming research, their presence on the farm can impact the lives of the facilitating farmers. Some studies suggest that farmers can benefit from engaging in social farming through an additional source of income (Leck *et al.*, 2014), increased farmer integration into the community (Borgi *et al.*, 2020) and an improved quality of life (Ihlebaek *et al.*, 2016); important aspects as, traditionally, farmers in rural areas can experience elevated stress and an associated decline in mental well-being (Borgi *et al.*, 2020; Leck *et al.*, 2014). However, farmers may also experience stress through their facilitation due to a lack of support when working with service users, and a difficulty in separating their professional role of social farmer and being an informal caregiver (Ihlebaek *et al.*, 2016; Knapik, 2020).

Despite an uptake in social farming in Ireland (Social Farming Ireland, 2019), research concerning farmers' experiences of facilitating social farming in the Irish context or in an occupational science or occupational therapy context is lacking (Fieldhouse and Sempik, 2014); therefore, this study focuses solely on the farmers' perspective. The aims of the study were to explore the farmers' experience of facilitating social farming as an occupation in an Irish context and uncover the associated values and meaning.

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen to explore the form, function and meaning of the occupation of facilitating social farming through examining the meanings participants ascribe to it. Individual semi-structured interviews were employed and conducted over a two-month period from February–March 2021.

Participants and recruitment

Inclusion criteria for the study required that participants had been social farming for over one year, were at least 18 years of age and were living in Ireland. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Carpenter and Suto, 2008), which involved using Social Farming Ireland as a gatekeeper for recruitment. The organisation distributed an information flyer to potential participants and ten eligible social farmers expressed interest (Table 1). An information letter and consent form were emailed to participants prior to the interviews.

Table 1 Profiles of social farmers who consented to participate in the research study

	Pseudonym	Year commenced social farming	Type of farm
1.	Harry	2018	Dairy farm
2.	James	2018	Mixed family farm with calf to beef, horse rearing, polytunnel veg and poultry
3.	Ciara and Paul	2018	Suckler and sheep farm
4.	Seamus	2019	Farm forestry with sheep and poultry
5.	Michael	2019	Primarily livestock, poultry
6.	Sophie	2018	Beef, poultry, polytunnel and vegetable growing
7.	Valerie	2018	Dairy
8.	Charlotte	2018	Primarily tree farming and horticulture
9.	Kate	2019	Suckler herd, poultry
10.	Sam	2019	Small organic sheep and horticultural farm

Source: Table created by authors

Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and removal of unique identifiers.

Data collection

An interview guide was developed, informed by literature and the research aims. A pilot interview was conducted, prior to data collection, with an experienced qualitative researcher. Questions were refined based on feedback, and data from the pilot interview was excluded from subsequent analysis. Data collection consisted of ten interviews via either Microsoft Teams or telephone. Interviews were conducted with two researchers present, audio-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Interview duration ranged from 30 to 45 min per interview.

Data analysis

Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the transcripts and was followed in a systematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were checked for accuracy and re-read. Line-by-line coding was conducted and important sections of text were assigned labels (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Researcher triangulation was used to ensure credibility, involving the researchers completing coding separately and then comparing codes. Themes were formed by grouping codes that complemented one another. Theme refinement was completed by reviewing the coded data and determining whether themes accurately represented the meanings evident in the data set (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, member checking was applied by e-mailing the preliminary findings to participants to ensure an accurate interpretation of their experiences (Bryman, 2016). An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, involving keeping records of research design, data collection decisions, interview transcripts, data analysis coding and research meetings.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the university's Social Research Ethics Committee (approval number: CT-SREC-2020-23). Participation in the study was voluntary and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Findings

Four broad themes, which were referred to by the participants both directly and indirectly, were identified during data analysis. Findings are supported by direct quotes from participants.

Theme 1: Characteristics of the farm and farmer

Participants described the form of facilitating social farming and outlined why they decided to engage in the occupation and the traits necessary to be a social farmer. This theme is divided into three sub-themes.

(A) *Laid back and the right fit - type of farm and activities*

The participants typically facilitate 12-week placements, whereby one to four service users attend their farm, for one day a week. Participants noted the advantage of having small-scale, mixed farms with both horticultural and livestock elements. Three participants felt that social farming would not be suited to larger scale farms such as intensive dairy farms, due to their demanding nature. Instead, an important element of small-scale farms is the relaxed environment and less pressure to complete tasks. Therefore, emphasis can be placed on enjoying "the craic" and "the banter" while doing the activities:

"[...] we take it handy, there's no pressure at all, no stress usually! I find this work environment a lot more [...] enjoyable!" – Sophie

Collaborative decision making was employed between the farmers and service users when planning the activities for social farming. Each service user had different skills and interests, and the activities depended on this. It emerged that each day facilitating social farming is different:

"Some might be more interested in the horticultural side of things, and some might be more interested in the livestock side. So, you'd always try to facilitate whatever the lads were interested in." – James

(B) *Motivations*

Intrinsic motivations for facilitating social farming varied with each participant. Some participants described being enticed due to previous experience of working in the disability sector. Participants also described extrinsic motivations such as wanting to develop the farm and to enhance their finances:

"[...] we heard that you get paid to take people onto the farm and we thought this would be great if we could get some extra money from the farm." – Ciara

(C) *Traits and skills*

Some participants described that agricultural skills alone may not be sufficient to successfully facilitate social farming. Participants described the value of having an open and non-judgemental nature. Patience was highlighted by most participants as important, along with practical skills such as organisation, safety awareness and creativity to overcome challenges. Harry and Sam described social farmers as having a particular personality:

"It seems to be a personality-based thing." – Sam

Conversely, two participants emphasised that no specific skills were necessary to start social farming, and skills were developed through experience. Instead, a willingness to learn and an ability to build rapport with service users were important:

"I think you just need to have the ability to chat away [...]. There's no extra qualities that are needed. I suppose you'd want to be calm. Nothing spectacular." – Kate

Theme 2: Connection

Through engagement in the farm environment, connections are developed between the farmer, the service user and the community on the farm. This theme is divided into two sub-themes.

(A) *Sharing the home and family environment*

The participants placed an emphasis on sharing their home and family environment with service users. Mealtimes were important elements of the day, and service users were invited to share meals in the home kitchen:

"It's huge, bringing them into the kitchen, your home place. Just letting them make their tea, boiling the kettle and making their own cup of tea." – Ciara

Participants highlighted the importance of facilitating an environment that contrasted the healthcare environments that the service users regularly attend, with engagement in activities that they may not experience regularly:

"One of the highlights for the other guys was [...] being allowed to pour his own tea, that he lived in an institution and drinking from a mug that wasn't white." – Seamus

(B) *Social network*

Participants described the development of a social network through engagement in social farming. Bonds develop between the farmers and the service users through doing activities together on the farm:

"You really do build a great bond with people when you're working together, side by side [...] out in nature together." – Sophie

A theme echoed by three participants was the sense that their work has increased meaning and purpose due to their connection with the service users. Facilitating social farming gave participants the opportunity to positively impact another's life and service users often left in a good mood following a day on the farm:

"There's never any question about the meaningfulness of your job because it's just obvious. It's very satisfying." – Michael

Service users also develop connections with different generations of the participants' family and other members of the community, with four participants noting the connections between their children and the service users. These connections were often developed around the kitchen table, learning from each other through conversation:

"The kids would come home [...] they would be jumping off the bus to make sure that they have time with the service users. They were mad to talk to them and the feeling was mutual [...] The service users were mad to meet the kids." – Kate

Participants also described developing stronger relationships within the family through sharing in the daily activities of life on the farm. Five participants explained that social farming was something that they engaged in as a family:

"In one sense, its helped relationships in the family. I probably never had so much interaction with them as I do now, and social farming contributed to that cause we're all sitting down to have meals together and we wouldn't usually do that." – James

Theme 3: Mutually beneficial farming

Connections that developed between the individuals resulted in mutually beneficial farming, impacting the farmer, service user and the farm environment itself. This theme is divided into three sub-themes.

(A) Occupational rejuvenation

It emerged that participants felt that facilitating social farming brought life back to the farm and reinvigorated the environment. James compared it to the "*meitheal culture*" because he sees a community gathering to work together:

"We wanted to reinvigorate the farm in some way, but we didn't really know how. But social farming really turned out to be a perfect opportunity to do that because it really brought a huge amount of life back to the farm." – James

Participants recognised that facilitating social farming contributed to the opportunity to do projects and make improvements to the farm that otherwise would not have occurred:

"[...] we would never have started the kitchen garden without social farming." – Valerie

The participant's narratives described that social farming renewed their own passion in farming and allowed them to appreciate aspects of farm life that they had previously taken for granted. This led to increased motivation in engaging in farm work and realising the value of slowing down and taking time to have "*fun*":

"It definitely just increases your own interest in the whole place, to stop and just appreciate everything [...]" – Sophie

(B) Personal growth for the farmers

Participants overall described a change in perspective and learning about oneself. All ten participants noted being on a constant learning curve and being challenged through different perspectives:

"I think it changed the course of my life really [...] in a very positive way." – Michael

Seamus noted that facilitating social farming created a meaningful sense of achievement, having built rapport with service users that he initially found difficult to connect with. All participants felt that facilitating social farming enabled them to "*make a real difference*" to service users:

"Even the smiles on their faces when they come in in the morning. You know you are doing something good." – Kate

(C) Personal growth for service users

All participants described social farming as meaningful work that gave service users a sense of purpose. Service users gained skills and became "*more confident and competent*." Harry described one service user coming out of her shell, explaining that her family expressed awe seeing "*a different girl then the one they were used to*" at the end of the placement.

A common experience noted by participants was increased independence skills and reduced challenging behaviours among service users on the farm:

"He had three people looking after him [...] and after he was brought to the social farm, he was so relaxed [...] he travelled alone to his parents in England [...] I think that wouldn't have been possible if he hadn't taken part in social farming." – Michael

Theme 4: Challenges facilitating social farming

Participants also highlighted challenges encountered. The theme is divided into two sub-themes.

(A) Personal challenges

For two participants, it emerged that facilitating social farming could be a demanding experience in terms of time and energy. They indicated that health and safety aspects were stressful, particularly when service users displayed challenging behaviours:

"[...] but he was extremely active and more likely to hurt himself or to hurt me if I wasn't careful, it was more stressful in one way, more intense." – Harry

Four participants suggested that a lack of experience in the disability sector posed as a barrier initially when facilitating social farming:

"I'm failing no matter how friendly I am to this guy [...] the biggest challenge is just trying to get to know the clients." – Sam

(B) Operational challenges

All participants highlighted financial challenges experienced while facilitating social farming. Concerns were expressed about the lack of funding in the sector. Participants felt that there needs to be a commercial element for the farmer for it to be financially viable:

"The lack of funding that's in the sector [...] social farmers do need to be paid for their work cause there's a lot of things that need to be changed [...] money has to be spent on the farm." – Harry

Some participants also mentioned a lack of awareness about social farming amongst the wider community. This contributes to difficulty in obtaining funding for the placements, as well as challenges getting healthcare organisations involved and, thus, service users engaged:

"People don't get the concept of social farming in care organizations. They can be very [...] small minded and they have this picture in their head of people being exploited in work." – Michael

Another concern expressed by participants was placement duration. Most placements lasted 12 weeks; however, participants felt that service users would benefit from engaging long-term:

"It's not a long-term thing. The biggest downside is that there's not a clear pathway.

So, what are we doing it for, you'd question that [...]" – Valerie

Discussion

Social farming is an occupation for the farmer, the service user and the community on the farm, and the findings show that social farming has the potential to positively impact well-being. Farmers as a population are at high risk of mental health difficulties (Borgi *et al.*, 2020; Ihlebæk *et al.*, 2016), partly attributed to the lack of social occupations (Leck *et al.*, 2014). Leck *et al.* (2014) indicated that facilitating social farming can stimulate change, and this study elucidates on this with the emergent theme of "Connection" as a catalyst for this change. Consistent with Ellingsen-Dalskau *et al.* (2016), participants noted an increase in social occupations as a "*meitheal culture*"

was developed on the farm which encompasses the idea of community spirit built through working side-by-side. These connections led to a sense of occupational rejuvenation in farming and life on the farm as participants experienced a renewed passion and appreciation for farming, their farm and their family relationships when sharing occupations embedded in farm life with the service users. They also rediscovered the value of taking time to enjoy the often overlooked, mundane occupations centred around farm life, such as having lunch together in the family kitchen. Social farming was noted to positively impact the farmer, reflecting Ihlebæk *et al.* (2016) who found that 80% of interviewed social farmers agreed that social farming had increased their quality of life. Therefore, facilitating social farming may be beneficial for farmers' overall well-being.

Internationally, social farming service users are reported to value the non-care context and authentic farm environment (Borgi *et al.*, 2020; Hassink *et al.*, 2010) and Anderson *et al.* (2017) highlighted the family-like environment that is created. Participants in this study explicitly stated that the farm environment includes not merely the occupations associated with farming itself, but interactive occupations embedded in life on the farm such as interacting with the farmer's family. Rather than just providing a non-care context, a sense of home and family is shared and the cross-generational element of the occupation of farming in the family was evident. An appreciation of the bonds developed between children on the farm and the service users was highlighted and supports the idea of mutual benefits between the service users, farmers and the farmer's family.

Different participant opinions emerged regarding whether social farming was more suited to particular personality traits. Two participants expressed that farmers do not require specialised skills for engagement; however, consistent with the literature (Leck *et al.*, 2014), the remaining participants noted that certain skills including patience, organisation, safety awareness and creativity are necessary. It also emerged that participants learned additional skills to overcome challenges within social farming, notably, successfully interacting with service users with communication difficulties. Farmers had to adapt their communication approach to establish connection, leading to satisfaction for the participants and an increased meaning of social farming for them. Despite overcoming some challenges, several participants still reported difficulties, although few previous studies have addressed this. Ihlebæk *et al.* (2016) and Knapik (2020) suggested that facilitating social farming may be stressful for the farmers. Some participants in this study found facilitating social farming emotionally intense due to the time, energy and health and safety considerations required for engagement, considerations which require further scrutiny to tailor supports for facilitating farmers.

Limitations

The findings of this study may be somewhat limited by the fact that recruitment was conducted through one organisation that oversees social farming in Ireland. It is also important to consider possible bias in these responses, as many of the participants were or had been involved in healthcare, or

research related to social farming and, therefore, are invested in social farming. Participants were actively social farming so collecting experiences of farmers who have ceased social farming may help further explore the nuances of associated challenges. Furthermore, due to COVID-19, interviews took place remotely and participants were required to have access to technology.

Conclusion

Social farming is a growing concept; however, further research on the topic is still required (García-Llorente *et al.*, 2018; Leck *et al.*, 2014; Murray *et al.*, 2019). Depth of knowledge about social farming from a healthcare perspective was frustrating for the participants who noted feeling that the positive impact of social farming was not universally understood by healthcare providers; however, with the emergence of a pilot programme in Ireland between Social Farming Ireland and HSE-based mental health services (Deegan *et al.*, 2023), this may provide enhanced knowledge transfer. Leck *et al.* (2014) expressed that financial support for facilitating social farming is crucial, but organisations are often resistant or unable to provide the necessary finance. Using an occupational science perspective, the findings, while preliminary, reveal the nuance complexities embedded in the occupation that can have benefits for the farmer, their families and the service users. To overcome the barriers associated with social farming, it is crucial to further explore and communicate its extended benefits to healthcare professionals and policymakers who are positioned to further influence society, increase funding and establish training activities for enhancement of skillsets which could benefit farmers in their facilitation of social farming (Nazzaro *et al.*, 2021).

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Corresponding author

Eoin Gorman can be contacted at: eoin.gorman@ucc.ie