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Bridging cultural divides: Culture and acculturation in Latino/a–service provider interactions

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Abstract

This case study examines how culture and acculturation shape interactions between Latino/a immigrant farmers and service providers in Missouri. Grounded in Valdivia et al.'s (2012) framework on capital creation and complemented by Bourdieu's (2012) concepts of habitus and field, the research draws on focus groups and interviews with Latino/a immigrant farmers and agricultural service providers across Southwest and Central Missouri. The analysis reveals seven interconnected themes spanning institutional disconnect, trust barriers, time administration, communication, market entry, financial practices, and gender dynamics. Acculturation emerged as a bilateral dynamic in which both farmers and service providers interpret each other's behavior through institutional logical

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

frameworks that are culturally distinct. Farmers' prior experiences in Latin America, including encounters with institutional corruption and financial instability, shaped their wariness toward U.S. institutions, while service providers' habitus (the values, beliefs, and motivations they absorb through professional training and social position) led them to misread farmer behavior as cultural deficiency rather than adaptive strategy. To organize these dynamics, the study develops a *bidirectional acculturation interface:* a conceptual framework that extends acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) to the farmer–service provider relationship by integrating Valdivia et al.'s capital creation framework with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field. The framework identifies two mechanisms that shape outcomes: a misalignment mechanism that blocks farmers' conversion of existing types of capital into institutional support and an alignment mechanism that enables conversion when service providers recognize the capitals that farmers bring. Findings underscore the need for culturally responsive services, revised eligibility criteria accommodating small-acreage and dispersed operations, accessible financial products, and institutional attention to the context of reception that shapes farmers' willingness to engage.

Keywords
Latino/a immigrant farmers, Hispanic farmers, bidirectional acculturation, farmer–service provider interactions, capital creation, context of reception, habitus, livelihood strategies, Midwest

Introduction

The U.S. is home to over 112,000 Latino/a farmers collectively managing approximately 37 million acres of farmland (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service [USDA NASS], 2024). The Midwest is witnessing a subtle yet notable demographic shift, characterized by a growing number of farmers and ranchers (henceforth identified as farmers) who identify as Latino, of Spanish descent, or Hispanic. This demographic shift introduces new challenges and opportunities in agriculture, where formal and informal institutions shape access to resources and expertise, allocate technical support, and create the conditions necessary for developing sustainable and economically viable operations (North, 1991, 1996; Valdivia et al., 2021). As the number of Latino/a immigrant farmers grows and their land management expands, understanding how institutions—including government agricultural agencies such as the USDA Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Credit System, commercial agricultural lenders, and university extension programs—support their integration and success becomes increasingly important. Institutions are human-made constraints that shape socioeconomic and political interactions, defining the rules that govern how participants engage (North, 1991, 1996). While institutions frame the reality we operate in, belief systems reflect our internal understanding of that reality (North, 2008). Stalled progress in many groups often stems from restrictive institutional frameworks that fail to incentivize economic expansion (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Minkoff-Zern, 2018, 2025; North, 1994).

Culture represents the accumulated knowledge and shared learning passed across generations that informs individuals' actions and livelihoods (Smith, 1966). It is deep-rooted and long-lasting, shapes behavior, and evolves slowly over extended periods (North, 1990, 1991; Williamson, 2000). Acculturation describes the process by which newcomers adapt to their new community's cultural norms, adjusting to varying degrees to both the surrounding culture and their culture of origin (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010; Valdivia et al., 2012), and therefore influences not only social integration but also economic decision-making within institutional environments. Immigrants' acculturation strategies can therefore reflect a combination of adjustments to both their native and host cultures, shaping their social integration and economic participation (Leiva et al., 2025; Valdivia et al., 2012) and, consequently, their capacity to contribute and thrive.

This broader understanding of institutional impact sets the stage for examining the specific situation of Latino/a farmers in this study. These farmers are immigrants and native Spanish speakers with varying lengths of U.S. residence, some arriving directly to the Midwest from their home countries, and others migrating from various U.S.

regions where they had previously worked as farm laborers or factory workers, or in service industries. Drawn by the area's high-quality soil, they supplement their agricultural income with diverse livelihood sources, such as operating small restaurants or running other small businesses. Before migrating to the U.S., all engaged in small-scale agricultural production in their home countries. While the category "Latino/a" provides a useful analytical lens, the populations it encompasses carry distinct migration histories, agricultural traditions, and institutional experiences.

This background provides essential context for understanding the objectives that influence farmers' agricultural decisions as they transition to more established operations. However, the conventional assumption of farms prioritizing profit maximization does not fully capture the breadth of objectives guiding Latino/a immigrant farmers' early career decisions. While many farmers operate to maximize profits, other goals such as asset expansion, risk minimization, lifestyle maintenance, farm size maximization, and debt avoidance also play important roles (Drummond & Goodwin, 2011). For Latino/a immigrant farmers, early farming stages focus less on financial gain and more on family involvement, building social networks, and ensuring food quality and security (Flora et al., 2012; Huerta-Arredondo et al., 2023; Lewis, 2009; Thompson, 2011). As they become more established, managing marketing, financial, and production risks becomes critical (García-Pabón, 2011), with increased investments in agriculture and training significantly associated with market engagement (Leiva et al., 2025). This complexity underscores the diverse motivations and challenges Latino/a farmers face as they navigate the agricultural sector.

This study interviewed both farmers and service providers across governmental and commercial sectors to better understand how culture and acculturation shape farmers' interactions with resource providers. While acculturation theory has long focused on one-directional immigrant adaptation, a smaller body of work has recognized the bidirectional nature of cultural contact, whether through bidimensional frameworks that track heritage and host-culture orientations (Berry, 1997) or interactive models that theorize reciprocal change in both groups (Bourhis et al., 1997). This bidirectional dynamic has not been examined in the agricultural institutional context, where farmers and service providers occupy distinct positions in the same field. This study addresses that gap by examining how culture and acculturation jointly shape the interface between Latino/a immigrant farmers and agricultural service providers. Integrating Valdivia et al.'s (2012) framework on capital creation strategies with Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of habitus and field, the analysis reveals how the culturally distinct orientations of both farmers and service providers—each operating within different institutional contexts—condition their interactions and outcomes. Across seven themes, a consistent pattern emerges: misalignment between these cultural frames constrains farmers' ability to convert existing capital into institutional support and economic advancement. To organize these dynamics, the study develops a conceptual framework—*the bidirectional acculturation interface*—that extends acculturation theory to the farmer–service provider relationship. Findings carry direct implications for culturally responsive service design, revised program eligibility criteria, and institutional approaches that recognize the assets Latino/a immigrant farmers contribute.

Conceptual Framework

Valdivia et al. (2012) provide the primary theoretical foundation for this analysis, exploring capital creation strategies among Latino/a newcomers in rural Midwestern communities. Their framework examines how immigrants utilize their assets—spanning economic, human, social, and cultural capitals—to establish sustainable livelihoods. Central to this framework is the recognition that cultural and social capitals play pivotal roles in shaping economic opportunities: immigrants' life experiences, social networks, and knowledge of local institutions directly influence their integration into new environments. Leiva et al. (2025) and Valdivia et al. (2012) demonstrate that acculturation patterns—particularly the degree to which immigrants maintain connections to both their heritage culture and the host culture—significantly affect resource access, network building, and economic success.

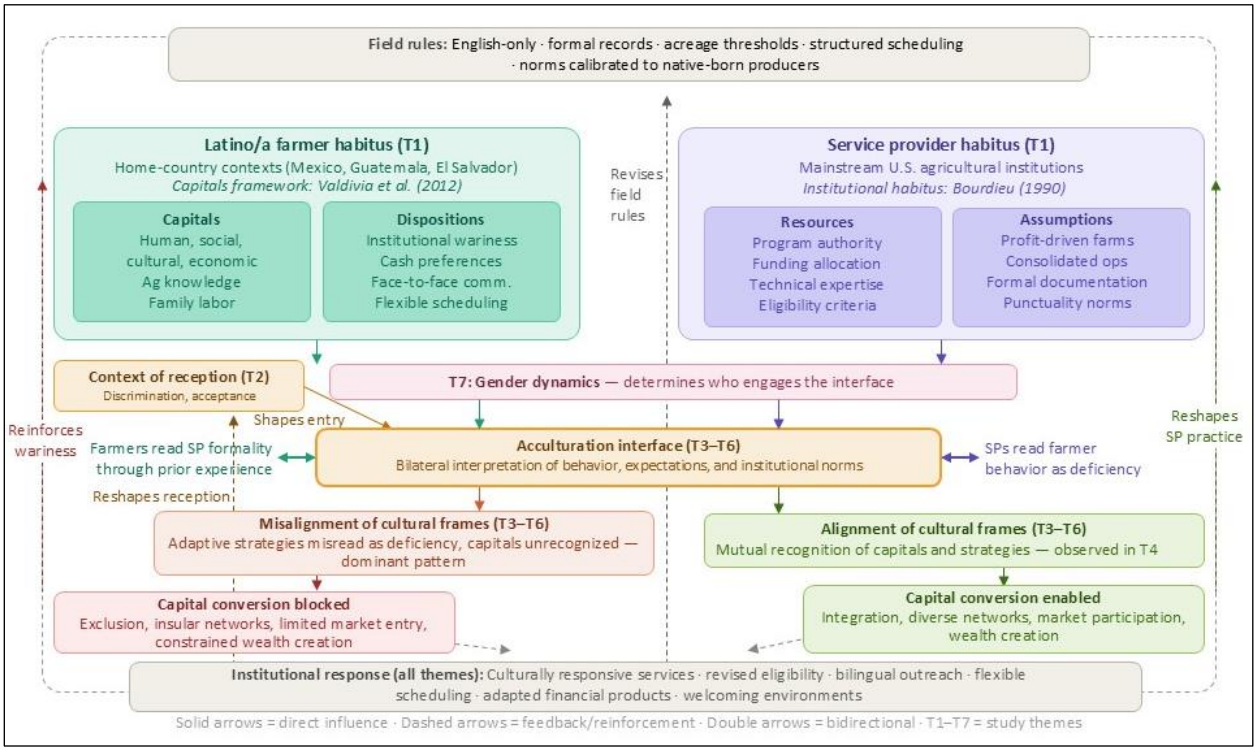
This framework is complemented by Bourdieu's (1990) related concepts of habitus and field. Habitus refers to durable dispositions formed from early life experiences in specific social contexts, influencing how individuals perceive opportunities and navigate institutions. These patterns of thought and behavior, shaped by factors like family upbringing and education, are both stable and adaptable, subtly guiding personal actions. Field describes networks of positions within a social space, each governed by its own rules and norms—in this case, the U.S. agricultural sector, with its particular institutional expectations and practices.

The Bidirectional Acculturation Interface

Integrating these frameworks yields a novel conceptual model that extends acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) beyond its traditional focus on one-directional immigrant adaptation to analyze how culture and acculturation jointly shape farmer–service provider relationships (Figure 1). The model positions the acculturation interface at the center, where the culturally shaped habitus of both Latino/a immigrant farmers and agricultural service providers meet in the U.S. agricultural field. Farmers arrive at this interface carrying capitals and dispositions formed in the institutional contexts of their home countries, while service providers bring institutional resources and assumptions shaped by mainstream U.S. agricultural norms. The context of reception, including experiences of discrimination or acceptance, and gender dynamics and language proficiency mediate who engages the interface and under what conditions. The model is explicitly bidirectional: farmers interpret service provider formality through the lens of prior institutional

Figure 1. The Bidirectional Acculturation Interface

The framework extends acculturation theory to the farmer–service provider relationship by positioning both parties as operating from culturally shaped habitus that meet in the U.S. agricultural field. Context of reception, gender dynamics, and language proficiency mediate entry into the acculturation interface, which produces two possible paths: a misalignment mechanism in which cultural frames fail to align and block capital conversion, and an alignment mechanism in which service providers' recognition of the capitals and strategies farmers bring enables it. Dashed arrows represent feedback loops through which outcomes reinforce or reshape dispositions, institutional practices, and field rules. Themes 1–7 are mapped to the model components from which they emerge.



experiences, while service providers interpret farmer behavior through the lens of conventional agricultural norms.

When these cultural frames misalign, farmers' adaptive strategies are misread as deficiency, blocking capital conversion. Mutual recognition of each party's capitals and strategies brings alignment, which enables capital conversion and supports integration into diverse institutional networks. Feedback loops illustrate how outcomes are self-reinforcing: exclusion deepens institutional wariness, while positive engagement reshapes both service provider practice and the broader context of reception. This integrated model enables researchers to examine how farmers modify their native farming techniques to align with U.S. agricultural practices, how culture and acculturation influence economic behaviors, and how market engagement dynamics develop. Understanding support from local institutions can also reveal how policies and economic incentives influence Latino/a immigrant farmers' decisions and their integration into the local agricultural economy.

Culture, Acculturation, and Trust Dynamics

Previous research demonstrates that maintaining connections to both Anglo and heritage Latin American cultures—what Valdivia et al. (2012) describe as an integration or bicultural acculturation strategy—significantly improves immigrants' access to resources, network building, and overall economic success compared to one-way assimilation into Anglo culture alone. In this framework, orientation toward heritage culture is tracked through "Spanish acculturation" measures (reflecting continued engagement with Spanish language use), while orientation toward the host culture is tracked through "Anglo acculturation" measures. Language serves as a well-established proxy for measuring acculturation (Berry, 1997; Chiswick & Miller, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Leiva et al. (2025) applied these acculturation measures for the first time to examine market entry and agricultural sales among Latino/a immigrant farmers. Traditional one-way assimilation can adversely affect Latino/a immigrants by enforcing dominant cultural norms, marginalizing Latino/a cultural identities, and potentially leading to internalized discrimination in the community (Feagin & Cobas, 2014). In the Midwest, both Anglo and Spanish acculturation (encompassing language usage with relatives and acquaintances, spoken and written linguistic skills, and proficiency in electronic media) are significantly associated with a lower likelihood of market entry, by 20% and 26%, respectively (Leiva et al., 2025). Farmers more acculturated to Anglo norms often pursue more diverse livelihoods and off-farm employment, allocating fewer hours to farming, while those with stronger Spanish acculturation may face communication barriers with English-speaking agricultural institutions.

For Latino/a immigrant farmers engaged in market activities, variables such as the scale of land cultivated, workforce size, personal plus familial income, and hours invested in farming are linked to significant increases in agricultural sales (Leiva et al., 2025). Conversely, higher degrees of Anglo acculturation and farmers' negative views about community context (including experiences of discrimination, lack of acceptance, or social isolation) are significantly linked to reductions in agricultural sales. Socially, the sense of being accepted by the community significantly influences professional engagement and general well-being. Systemic racism, influenced by racial framing, frequently places Latino/a immigrants in a disadvantaged position, affecting their economic activities (Feagin & Cobas, 2014; Minkoff-Zern, 2025; Valdivia et al., 2008).

These complex dynamics of acculturation and economic participation underscore the broader social challenges Latino/a immigrant farmers face and set the stage for exploring effective engagement strategies. Successful engagement with Latino/a immigrant farmers hinges on cultural competence, avoiding stereotypes, and recognizing individual needs (García-Pabón, 2011; García-Pabón & Ostrom, 2015; Huerta-Arredondo et al., 2023).

Building trust between Latino/a immigrant farmers and institutional actors (whether government agencies, nonprofit organizations, university extension programs, or commercial lenders) is crucial and can be particularly challenging. The nature of trust barriers varies across these institutional contexts. Such wariness may be informed by prior

experiences with corruption, inefficiency, or unresponsive bureaucracies in participants' countries of origin (Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador). Research documents the corrosive relationship between corruption and institutional trust in Mexico, specifically (Morris & Klesner, 2010), and across several Latin American countries, including El Salvador, where corruption erodes confidence in public institutions, political legitimacy, and trust in civil servants (Hauk et al., 2022; Seligson, 2002). For farmers who carry these experiences, the transition to U.S. institutions represents a significant shift, one where trust can potentially be rebuilt through positive, consistent interactions with local agricultural support systems.

Methodology

This section describes the study's case study design, the focus groups and interviews conducted with farmers and service providers, the process of participant engagement, and the analytical steps through which the seven themes were developed.

Data Gathering and Evaluation

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology to examine how culture and acculturation shape the interactions between Latino/a immigrant farmers and agricultural service providers in Missouri. This context is well-suited to "how" and "why" questions where researchers have limited control over events (Yin, 2009). The case is defined as the farmer–service provider interface within Missouri's agricultural institutional landscape, encompassing both Southwest and Central regions. Case studies enable in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena within their real-world context, particularly when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined (Feagin et al., 1991; Merriam, 1988; Tellis, 1997). This approach captured the nuances of participants' activities, attitudes, and motivations from their own perspectives.

A bilingual research team conducted interviews and focus groups. The research team was composed of researchers of Hispanic, bicultural (Hispanic and Anglo), and Anglo backgrounds with over 25 years of combined experience working with immigrant communities in the Midwest. Two service-provider focus groups (n = 21) and two farmer focus groups (n = 32) were conducted across Southwest and Central Missouri. The team's established connections with Latino/a farming communities in the study regions facilitated participant trust and recruitment. Farmer focus groups and interviews were conducted in Spanish or English based on participants' preferences, while all service provider sessions were conducted in English. Sessions took place in neutral settings, including community centers and churches. Participants received a modest monetary incentive for their time. This cultural and linguistic familiarity enabled candid discussion in settings where participants felt at ease. At the same time, the inclusion of Anglo researchers on the team provided an additional analytical perspective that guarded against assumptions rooted in shared cultural familiarity. The team was conscious that proximity to participants' experiences could introduce interpretive bias. To mitigate this, our analytical process (Figure 2) incorporated deliberate checks: independent analysis of each focus group dataset; systematic identification of potential biases; and a comprehensive review step designed to reevaluate methods, findings, and conclusions for shortcomings and gaps. This process follows the six-step sequence developed by Castro (2020) and draws on Braun and Clarke (2006) and Green et al. (2007), to which we added the seventh comprehensive review step as an original methodological contribution of this study. These procedural safeguards helped ensure that the analysis reflected participants' voices rather than the team's preconceptions.

To ensure validity, the study used triangulation across data sources, investigators, theories, and methods, as recommended by Feagin et al. (1991) and Yin (2009). Households were identified through purposive sampling across multiple locations, in collaboration with the University of Missouri's Cambio Center and regional partners. Farmer participants were selected based on three criteria: self-identification as a Latino/a immigrant, active farming operations in Missouri, and ownership or lease of agricultural land. Service provider participants included public- and private-sector professionals working with small producers in the targeted study areas.

Participants were recruited for focus groups, interviews, or both. The primary study areas included Lawrence and Barry counties in Southwest Missouri and Saline and Pettis counties in Central Missouri. Including two geographically and demographically distinct regions allowed the research team to compare emerging themes across different settlement patterns, agricultural activities, and community contexts. This strengthens the validity of the findings by confirming that key themes were consistent across settings rather than specific to a single location or population group (Feagin et al., 1991; Yin, 2009). This study was approved by the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. 2005869).

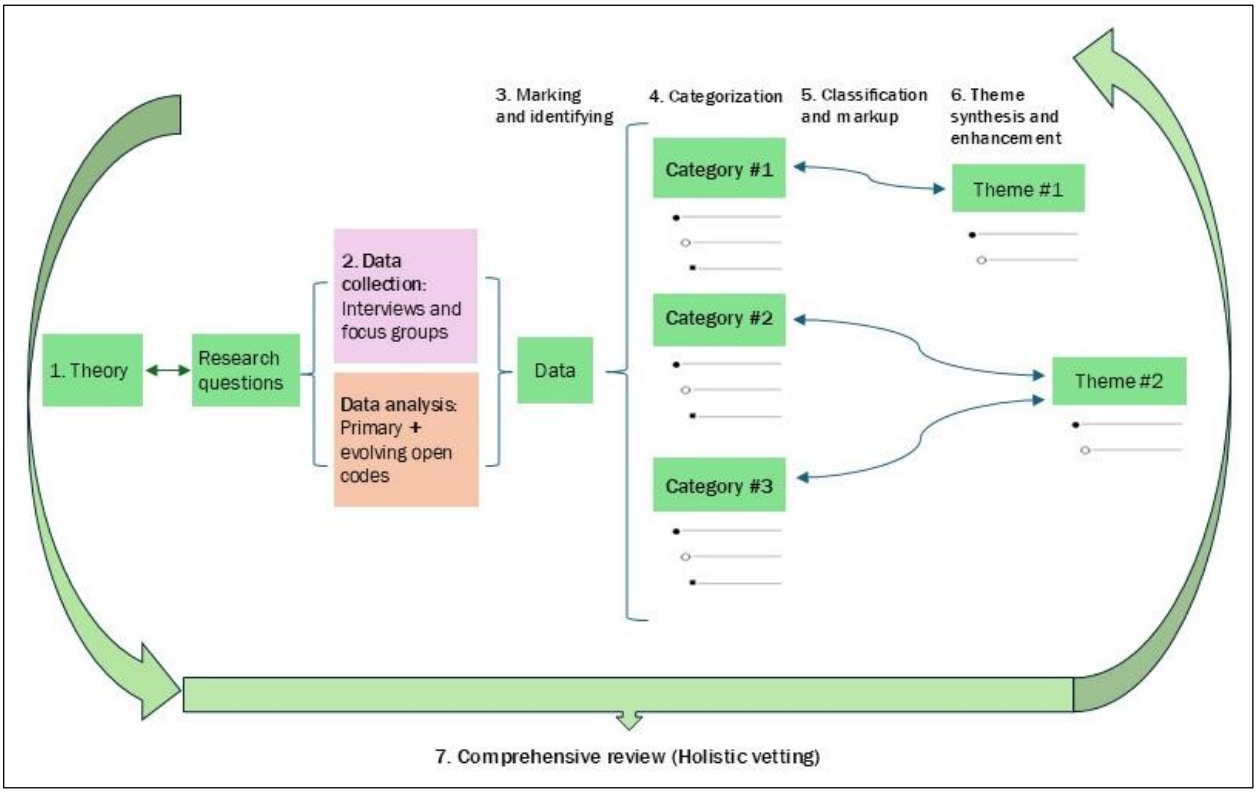
Participant Engagement and Feedback

Focus groups with service providers provided valuable insights into their knowledge, skills, and experiences working with farmers. Two service provider focus groups were conducted, comprising 21 participants across Southwest and Central Missouri. Participants included staff from the USDA Farm Service Agency (Common Programs, Farm Loans, Conservation, and Price Support units), the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Farm Credit System (a nationwide network of borrower-owned cooperative lending institutions that provides credit to agriculture and rural communities). Participants also included agricultural commercial lenders and agribusiness and youth program specialists from university extension programs. This diverse mix of representatives ensured that multiple viewpoints were captured. These focus groups revealed both the strengths service providers bring and the challenges they face when assisting Latino/a immigrant farmers.

Of the 32 farmer participants, approximately 50% were Mexican, 30% Guatemalan, and 20% Salvadoran. Roughly half farmed in Southwest Mis-

Figure 2. Data Analysis Process

The first six steps are adapted from Castro (2020), Braun and Clarke (2006), and Green et al. (2007). The seventh step, a comprehensive review process, is an original methodological contribution of this study that systematically reevaluates methods, findings, and conclusions against the assembled evidence, identifying and addressing potential shortcomings, biases, or gaps before results are finalized.



souri ($n \approx 15$), where participants were predominantly Mexican and engaged in small-scale cattle operations, and half farmed in Central Missouri ($n \approx 17$), where the population was more diverse, including Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran participants engaged in crop production. Farmers managed operations ranging from two to 35 acres. Length of residence in the U.S. varied from five to 45 years, and all participants had agricultural experience in their countries of origin prior to migration. All discussions and interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation. Two bilingual native Spanish speakers reviewed the recordings to verify transcription accuracy and enhance data interpretation quality. All Spanish-language transcripts were translated into English by native Spanish-English bilingual members of the research team to ensure accuracy and preserve contextual meaning. Detailed written notes were maintained during all sessions to capture additional contextual insights.

Data Analysis

The analysis combined deductive approaches drawn from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Green et al. (2007) with inductive methods to discover naturally emerging patterns, ideas, and connections in the data. The inductive analysis specifically examined factors influencing change, adaptation strategies, and the perspectives of both farmers and service providers. The research team conducted coding collaboratively through detailed examination of text and keywords, following the seven-step analytical process depicted in Figure 2. This combined approach helped reveal unique and unexpected topics that enriched the findings.

Transcribed texts were reviewed multiple times to document significant changes and adjustments that respondents reported. This careful documentation supported the development of descriptive codes, their organization into categories, and the identification of themes. Spreadsheets were used to organize data systematically and facilitate thematic analysis. Qualitative methods captured the personal, narrative dimensions of participants' experiences. Figure 2 depicts the data analysis process. The first six steps follow the sequence developed by Castro (2020), drawing on the thematic analysis approaches of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Green et al. (2007): reviewing theoretical frameworks and research questions, gathering and examining data, identifying relevant information, organizing and labeling data, classifying and marking up the labeled data, and synthesizing and refining themes. To this established sequence we added a seventh step—a comprehensive review process—that systematically reevaluates methods, findings, and conclusions against the assembled evidence. This additional step, an original methodological contribution of this study, strengthens the six-step approach by proactively identifying and addressing potential shortcomings, biases, or gaps before results are finalized.

Following Castro's (2020) recommendations, we present our findings through quotations, data summaries, and integrated analysis. This structured presentation clarifies underlying themes while connecting them to scholarly evidence from related research. We derived the themes by identifying common patterns across the data through both deductive and inductive reasoning, without predetermining their number or criteria. Deliberate steps ensured that preconceived perspectives did not bias the analysis, with potential biases actively identified and addressed throughout the process. Each of the four focus group datasets was analyzed independently. Analytical saturation was reached when no new thematic categories emerged. Through careful organization and coding, relevant themes emerged as shown in Figure 2. This rigorous process led to seven themes, which Table 1 describes briefly.

Findings

Analysis of focus groups and interviews with the 32 farmer and 21 service provider participants revealed seven interconnected themes reflecting how culture and acculturation shape interactions between Latino/a immigrant farmers and service providers. The seven themes correspond to distinct components of the bidirectional acculturation interface (Figure 1): Themes 1 and 2 concern entry conditions that shape whether farmers approach the interface at all, Themes 3 through 6 describe the interaction mechanics through which culturally shaped habitus meet within the U.S. agricultural

Table 1. Themes Highlighting the Role of Culture and Acculturation in Shaping the Interaction between Latino/a Immigrant Farmers and Service Providers

This table summarizes key themes from the study, illustrating how cultural and acculturation dynamics influence the interactions between Latino/a immigrant farmers and service providers.

Theme	Description
Theme 1: Disconnect Between Service Providers and Immigrant Latino/a Farmers	Cultural barriers hinder collaboration between service providers and immigrant Latino/a farmers. Service providers often lack awareness of Latino/a agricultural backgrounds and capabilities, while farmers remain unfamiliar with available programs and resources. Stereotypes portraying Latino/a immigrants primarily as laborers rather than agricultural entrepreneurs contribute to this disconnect. Enhancing cultural proficiency and understanding of acculturation processes can bridge these gaps.
Theme 2: Trust Barriers Between Latino/a Farmers and Service Providers	Significant trust issues stem from farmers' prior negative experiences with institutions in their countries of origin, where corruption and inefficiency have eroded confidence in formal systems. This habitus of institutional wariness transfers to U.S. contexts, creating hesitancy toward government agencies and formal documentation. Discrimination and exclusion encountered in U.S. contexts compound this wariness, making trust a specific mechanism through which context of reception shapes whether farmers engage the institutional interface.
Theme 3: Divergent Time Administration Between Latino/a Immigrant Farmers and U.S. Service Providers	Contrasting approaches to time create barriers to effective service provision. Latino/a immigrant farmers often manage smaller farms while balancing off-farm employment, household responsibilities, and family obligations—constraints that shape their scheduling flexibility. Service providers operating within structured schedules may misinterpret these time management differences as cultural preferences rather than practical adaptations to livelihood demands.
Theme 4: Communication and Language Barriers Between Latino/a Farmers and Service Providers	Language proficiency and cultural communication styles shape access to networks, training opportunities, and institutional support. Many Latino/a immigrants face English proficiency challenges, while high-context communication norms emphasizing relationship-building and face-to-face interaction differ from low-context U.S. institutional practices. Federal agencies have historically provided limited Spanish-language resources, and availability continues to vary across agencies and local offices.
Theme 5: Market Entry and Risk Mitigation Challenges for Latino/a Farmers	Latino/a immigrant farmers face challenges with market access, product management, direct selling, and price volatility. Prior experiences with intermediary-dominated transactions in home countries shape their expectations and strategies. Structural access barriers—not individual capacity—account for many market engagement gaps, including limited marketing knowledge, business expertise, and technical education.
Theme 6: Financial Practices and Livelihood Strategies Among Latino/a Immigrant Farmers	Latino/a immigrant farmers approach financial decisions in ways that differ from conventional U.S. practices. Prior experiences with economic instability and financial exclusion inform preferences for cash transactions and caution toward formal banking. Distinctive livelihood strategies include purchasing small plots across different locations, diversifying on-farm and off-farm income, and gradual transitions into formal markets. U.S. agricultural programs often overlook small-scale, diversified operations.
Theme 7: Cultural Gender Roles Among Latino/a Immigrant Farmers and Service Providers	Gender dynamics within Latino/a immigrant households shape patterns of social capital development and network access. Cultural norms around gender roles influence which family members communicate with institutional representatives and access agricultural resources. While traditional patriarchal structures persist in some households, gender ideologies are evolving toward more progressive norms emphasizing respect, fairness, and affection. Gender dynamics thus shape who enters the acculturation interface in the first place, determining whose institutional social capital accumulates through interactions with service providers.

field to produce misalignment or alignment, and Theme 7 addresses gendered access to the interface itself.

Theme 1: Disconnect Between Service Providers and Immigrant Latino/a Farmers

Profound cultural barriers hinder effective collaboration between service providers andimmigrant Latino/a farmers. Valdivia et al. (2012) emphasize that the context of reception—how receiving communities perceive and interact with newcomers—shapes immigrants' capacity to build social networks and access resources. When service providers lack understanding of Latino/a farmers' backgrounds and aspirations, they inadvertently create an unwelcoming context that limits farmers' integration into the agricultural field. One service provider reflected on this disconnect:

> I really didn't know that there were a lot of Hispanic Latino farmers at all, I just thought that they worked in industry. It's a big challenge to understand where people come from, like a third-world country to a place like this. —Service Provider, Central Missouri

This perception reveals deep-rooted stereotypes that misrepresent Latino/a immigrants primarily as laborers rather than potential agricultural entrepreneurs. Such assumptions reflect what Bourdieu (1990) describes as the habitus of service providers: internalized dispositions shaped by mainstream U.S. agricultural institutions that historically centered white, native-born farmers as the default agricultural producer. This institutional habitus, reinforced through training programs, eligibility criteria, and outreach practices designed for native-born producers, generates blind spots that prevent service providers from recognizing the cultural, social, and human capital that immigrant farmers bring to the agricultural field. From the farmers' perspective, this disconnect manifests as exclusion from institutional knowledge and support networks. A farmer expressed frustration with the lack of accessible pathways:

> I know that USDA has programs, but I don't know anything about the office. … I mean, we are unknowledgeable about these things. I can assure you that I know people in this area that would like to know how to start their own farms, but they don't know where to go or how to commercialize and be given support more than anything. —Farmer, Central Missouri

Another farmer from Southwest Missouri echoed this sense of exclusion: "Frankly, the one who'll still receive help is the American farmer. For us Latinos, maybe there are some programs, but us, we haven't gotten it yet." These experiences illustrate what Valdivia et al. (2012) describe as the disconnect between institutional frameworks and the lived realities of Latino/a newcomers. Latino/a farmers often encounter numerous challenges, including discrimination, limited networking opportunities, and minimal involvement in agricultural policy discussions (García-Pabón, 2011; Gonzalez & Jeanetta, 2013; Lewis, 2009; Minkoff-Zern, 2025). Valdivia et al. (2012) found that when newcomers perceive the community climate as negative (that is, marked by discrimination or lack of acceptance) they develop narrower social networks limited primarily to family and friends. This constrains their wealth creation opportunities. These patterns reflect not merely individual biases but systemic institutional structures that have historically marginalized farmers of color and perpetuate barriers, even when individual service providers hold welcoming intentions (Minkoff-Zern, 2025).

Enhancing the cultural proficiency of service providers and enriching their understanding of acculturation processes are essential steps toward bridging this disconnect. By recognizing the diverse forms of capital that Latino/a farmers contribute, including agricultural knowledge from their home countries and family labor practices (Minkoff-Zern, 2019), strong social networks, and entrepreneurial drive (Valdivia et al., 2012), service providers can more effectively support their integration and success in the agricultural sector.

Theme 2: Trust Barriers Between Latino/a Farmers and Service Providers

Significant trust barriers impede meaningful relationships between Latino/a immigrant farmers and

service providers. Building on Theme 1's discussion of the context of reception (Valdivia et al., 2012), trust barriers operate as a specific mechanism through which unwelcoming reception translates into reduced institutional engagement. Service providers recognized that farmers often hesitate to engage with formal documentation and institutional processes: "They just want to shy away from it, from what I know. When you mention anything that has to do with putting things on black and white paper, they just kind of shy away from it, until they get that trust." Service providers directly linked this wariness to farmers' prior experiences, noting that farmers were "afraid of governmental programs" and would avoid any process involving formal documentation. Farmers' own accounts reinforced this pattern. As one farmer in Central Missouri described, institutional distrust shaped financial behavior: "Before, anyone who wanted to go to a bank wouldn't go because they were scared, and they would hide all their money in their cushions and mattresses." Another, from Southwest Missouri, expressed the resulting sense of isolation from support systems: "Those of us that don't have enough, where do we go? Whom do we ask for help?" These accounts are consistent with research documenting the erosion of institutional trust in parts of Latin America due to corruption, financial instability, and unresponsive bureaucracies (Hauk et al., 2022; Morris & Klesner, 2010; Seligson, 2002). These dispositions are further reinforced when farmers encounter discrimination and exclusion in the U.S. context itself (Minkoff-Zern, 2025; Minkoff-Zern & Sloat, 2017), compounding the institutional wariness they carry from prior experiences.

A farmer from Southwest Missouri recounted a discouraging experience: "I went to ask in an office. I think it's called 'USDA' or something like that. I urgently needed a *bordo* [water dam]. They hardly looked at me. They ignored me." The institutional affiliation of public service providers adds another layer of complexity. As one service provider acknowledged:

> One challenge we have, which you already kind of mentioned, is that we are part of the government. That kind of puts up a barrier that they don't want to come in the office, let alone hear what we have to say. —Public Service Provider, Central Missouri

Valdivia et al. (2012) found that trusted community institutions such as churches, schools, and employers can serve as bridges between newcomers and receiving communities, facilitating access to higher-quality information and broader networks. Building trust through these intermediaries represents a promising strategy for aligning institutional practices with farmers' cultural preferences. By understanding these trust dynamics, service providers can develop more effective outreach strategies that acknowledge farmers' prior experiences while creating pathways to productive collaboration and successful market integration.

Theme 3: Divergent Time Administration Between Latino/a Immigrant Farmers and U.S. Service Providers

Contrasting approaches to time administration between Latino/a immigrant farmers and U.S. service providers create barriers to effective service provision. Farmers' time allocation reflects the diverse livelihood strategies characteristic of immigrant newcomers with limited institutional and financial capital (Valdivia et al., 2012). These constraints directly influence how farmers allocate their time across multiple demands.

Latino/a immigrant farmers in the Midwest often manage smaller farms, averaging 23 acres, and face numerous constraints, including limited funding, insufficient training, and varying literacy levels in both English and Spanish. Many farmers balance agricultural work with off-farm employment (Leiva et al., 2025), alongside household responsibilities and family obligations. This reality shapes their approach to scheduling, which may appear more flexible compared to the structured expectations of U.S. agricultural services. One farmer described this constant juggling:

> My coworkers ask, "What are you doing this weekend?" Work. "Tomorrow?" Work. "Day after?" Work. They joke, "Hey, your wife will leave you because you don't have time for her." —Farmer, Central Missouri

This scenario illustrates the challenging balance many Latino/a farmers maintain, often working on their farms during evenings and weekends while holding other jobs. From the farmers' perspective, inflexible institutional scheduling compounds these challenges. As one farmer in Southwest Missouri expressed: "Yes, a government agency. They're supposed to help, but they set the times."

Service providers, operating in a field that values punctuality and structured schedules, sometimes interpret these time management differences through a cultural lens. One service provider observed:

> I think culturally, they [Latino farmers] would rather tell you yes to something, and not do it, because they don't want to disappoint you. And so, time management means absolutely nothing to some cultures. —Service Provider, Southwest Missouri

What may appear as cultural difference often reflects adaptive livelihood strategies shaped by limited access to institutional and financial capital (Valdivia et al., 2012). Farmers managing multiple income sources, limited resources, and family responsibilities necessarily prioritize flexibility, while service providers' expectations, shaped by mainstream institutional norms, may not align with these practical realities. Time management thus becomes a space where adaptive livelihood strategies are misread as cultural deficiency.

Theme 4: Communication and Language Barriers Between Latino/a Farmers and Service Providers

Language proficiency and cultural communication styles represent critical dimensions of human capital that shape Latino/a immigrant farmers' access to agricultural resources and services (Valdivia et al., 2012). When newcomers lack English fluency or operate from different communication norms, their ability to build diverse networks, particularly connections to institutions beyond family and friends, remains constrained.

Statistics underscore these challenges. Among recent Latino/a immigrants who arrived within the past five years, approximately one-quarter are proficient in English (Pew Research Center, 2023). As noted above, acculturation along either dimension is associated with a lower likelihood of market entry (Leiva et al., 2025). Beyond language proficiency, cultural communication styles create additional friction. In high-context communication settings, where meaning is conveyed through implicit cues, shared understanding, and relationship-building rather than explicit verbal exchange, indirect communication is preferred, emphasizing social harmony (García-Pabón & Ostrom, 2015). Participants in this study, predominantly from rural communities in Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, where interpersonal trust and face-to-face interaction are central to social and economic life, reflected this pattern. This approach contrasts with the low-context communication style favored by U.S. service providers, who prioritize directness and efficiency. Service providers recognize the systemic nature of these gaps. One provider described the disconnect:

> A lot of the small farmers are doing year-round. None of them are Hispanic. It's a pretty easy thing to do: fill out a form, get a lot more money from the government, it's like a [US]$10,000 deal. There's no way that I am aware of that there is any kind of interface between the Hispanic community. We are always going to have the barrier of language, on both sides. —Service Provider, Central Missouri

Another provider in Southwest Missouri illustrated how personal connections can bridge cultural barriers: "I told him about my background working in Mexico, it's like he blossomed. He opened up to me, and we talked about how we both were familiar with Sonora. So, we were able to sign a loan." Farmers described their own adaptive strategies for navigating these barriers:

> As a Mexican, you don't really use the computer, many of us don't watch TV in English. In the morning, they give estimates on all the animals' worth. If I have to call an American by phone, I won't be able to say anything. Face to face, I can, because if he doesn't under-

> stand, I can use a different method. —Farmer, Southwest Missouri

This reliance on face-to-face communication reflects a communicative habitus shaped in high-context cultural settings, which misaligns with the low-context communication rules governing the U.S. agricultural field. The U.S. agricultural field operates largely through written forms, phone calls, and digital platforms, creating friction for farmers whose prior experiences did not include these modalities. Research confirms that major agricultural services, including USDA programs, are predominantly offered in English, creating significant access barriers for Spanish-speaking farmers (Calo & De Master, 2016; Minkoff-Zern, 2019; Ostrom et al., 2010). In response, USDA released a department-wide language access plan acknowledging that limited English proficiency has historically prevented meaningful access to federal agricultural resources and programs (USDA, 2023), although availability continues to vary across agencies and local offices. Addressing these barriers requires systemic investment in bilingual outreach, culturally responsive programming, and communication strategies that accommodate both linguistic needs and cultural preferences for relationship-based interaction.

Theme 5: Market Entry and Risk Mitigation Challenges for Latino/a Farmers

Latino/a immigrant farmers face substantial challenges with market access, product management, direct selling, and price volatility. Market engagement draws on the full range of capitals that Valdivia et al. (2012) identify, but depends particularly on the accumulated market knowledge, established buyer relationships, and institutional connections that newcomer farmers are still building (Leiva et al., 2025).

Participants from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador described agricultural systems in their home regions characterized by intermediary-dominated transactions, limited access to formal markets, and dependence on informal arrangements, experiences that shaped their expectations and strategies upon entering U.S. agriculture. One farmer described this experience:

> That is what worries us the most, because we came from Latin America, when you have a product there, and you were going to go sell it, there was always an intermediary. We called him the *coyote*. We would sell it to him at the price they wanted because no one would buy it [directly] from you. —Farmer, Central Missouri

These prior experiences shape farmers' habitus, which in turn conditions how they perceive risk, intermediaries, and market participation in U.S. agriculture. Leiva et al. (2025) found that increased investment in agriculture and training significantly enhances the probability of market engagement. However, many farmers lack access to marketing knowledge (Minkoff-Zern, 2019; Ostrom et al., 2010), business expertise, and technical education (Gonzalez & Jeanetta, 2013; Minkoff-Zern & Sloat, 2017). These gaps are compounded when farmers have limited English proficiency and less exposure to formal schooling, which can heighten their reluctance to engage with government agencies and institutional support programs (Minkoff-Zern, 2025). As one farmer in Central Missouri stressed, the need for training and information is acute: "If we had a little bit more information and help with how to enter the market. I think that a lot of people know how to work well. We need small farming trainings …"

Price volatility presents another significant challenge. García-Pabón (2011) notes that Latino/a immigrant farmers' socioeconomic backgrounds influence their risk management approaches, often leading to higher vulnerability due to limited understanding of mitigation strategies for price risks. One farmer described the difficult calculations involved:

> No, I didn't sell because the asking price was too cheap and I wasn't going to just give them away. I had to maintain them all that time and even still, I had to give them away at that same low price. So, since you sell at a high price, you also have to buy at a high price, but you also sell. Even if you buy cheaply, if you sell cheaply, that's how you lose more. —Farmer, Southwest Missouri

Service providers observe these struggles firsthand. One provider shared:

> This man has had his farm for 20 years, and he said, "I've worked a factory job, I've struggled. I have some cows and garden spots. I want to make my farm work for me so I can pay this thing off. I have had it for 20 years and it's not helping me. I'm in the red more than I am making any profit." —Service Provider, Central Missouri

These dynamics illustrate how structural access barriers, not individual capacity, account for many of the market engagement gaps documented in the Latino/a farming literature.

Theme 6: Financial Practices and Livelihood Strategies Among Latino/a Immigrant Farmers

Latino/a immigrant farmers approach financial decisions and livelihood development in ways that often differ from conventional U.S. farming practices. Valdivia et al. (2012) identify financial capital (including income, savings, and access to credit) as a critical component of wealth creation, noting that newcomers' financial strategies are shaped by their prior experiences and available networks. Leiva et al. (2025) demonstrated that combined personal and household income is significantly associated with agricultural sales volume, illustrating how these financing choices enable market participation despite limited access to formal credit.

For many Latino/a farmers, prior experiences with economic instability, currency volatility (Ocampo & Martin, 2003), and financial exclusion (Pérez et al., 2021) inform a preference for cash transactions and caution toward formal banking relationships. These financial dispositions reflect a habitus shaped by economic systems where formal banking was inaccessible, resulting in reliance on embodied financial knowledge rather than institutional financial capital. As one service provider in Southwest Missouri observed, "It's interesting that a lot of businesses owned by Latinos, it's cash stuff. They are not going to any commercial banks and borrowing the money to buy the storefront."

This preference for tangible assets over formal credit shapes distinctive livelihood strategies: purchasing small plots across different locations as funds allow, diversifying revenue through on-farm and off-farm income, and gradually transitioning into formal markets. As one farmer in Southwest Missouri explained, "You buy some acres, like 30, then work those for hours. So those acres generate the income we use to pay for them." Service providers often struggle to understand these operational patterns:

> One family that I have been working with the last couple months, they own 10 acres here, a half mile down, they have 20 acres. Another town over, they have another 25 acres. Typically, our local farmers know that if they want to sign up for a program or have an operation, they really need to keep it together or close enough that they can touch. —Service Provider, Central Missouri

However, reliance on cash transactions creates challenges for accessing government programs. As one service provider explained:

> Cash transactions are hard to track, which means they are hard to prove, which means that you can't qualify. They don't write it down; they don't file a Schedule F [with their annual tax filing]. Cash transactions are more difficult to quantify and prove to apply for government programs. —Service Provider, Central Missouri

Latino/a farmers' smaller scale of operations often disqualifies them from government small farming programs (Leiva et al., 2025). One provider highlighted this mismatch:

> The biggest obstacle that we are running into is that their house and land is a little bit smaller, about 20-25 acres. And a lot of our problems are based on wells, the number one thing they wanted was a well. But it is based on acres served. So, if you come in and you have a 20-acre farm, and we're only going to give you $120 towards a well, that's not going to pay much. —Service Provider, Southwest Missouri

Leiva et al. (2025) found that increased investments in agriculture and training significantly improve the likelihood of market engagement, suggesting that targeted support could accelerate transitions toward profitability. As Valdivia et al. (2012) suggest, institutions serving newcomers should recognize and accommodate these distinct financial strategies to support wealth creation. Effective interventions should include revised eligibility criteria that account for dispersed, small-acreage operations. Such adaptations would better align institutional support with the assets and strategies Latino/a immigrant farmers bring to agriculture.

Theme 7: Cultural Gender Roles Among Latino/a Immigrant Farmers and Service Providers

Gender dynamics within Latino/a immigrant households shape patterns of social capital development and network access. Cultural norms around gender roles, including expectations about who communicates with institutional representatives, can influence which family members build connections with service providers and, consequently, who gains access to agricultural resources and information. While these dynamics do not characterize all Latino/a households, service providers described encounters where traditional gender expectations influenced professional interactions.

Female service providers described encountering barriers rooted in traditional gender expectations. As one provider in Central Missouri reflected:

> I thought about it as a barrier, is being a female, and the Hispanic culture is a little different. I can't go to the men and talk to the men and have them respect what I have to say or maybe even acknowledge what I have to say.

This experience reflects how gendered expectations, which are present across some farming communities but shaped in this context by the habitus of some Latino/a households, can create friction in the U.S. agricultural setting. Male service providers described parallel challenges when attempting to communicate with Latino/a women:

> I have talked to many Hispanic wives, and they say, "My husband isn't here." They won't even hardly pass a message on: "No, you call him." And I'm just trying to tell them of an appointment. And it's cultural, it's a big cultural thing. Husbands don't like that sort of thing. So, there's definitely that demographic that causes issues as well. —Service Provider, Southwest Missouri

Among some participants in this study, these dynamics reflected a gendered habitus shaped by gender socialization in their home regions of Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, structuring who accumulated institutional social capital through service-provider interactions. Males lead and females often assume more subordinate roles adhering to male authority (Kemp & Rasbridge, 2004). Cultural constructs of *machismo* and *marianismo* can prescribe specific roles and behaviors for men and women in some communities (Chong & Baez, 2005). However, gender ideologies within Latino/a communities are not static. Walters and Valenzuela (2020) document evolving perspectives that emphasize respect, fairness, and affection in familial and interpersonal relationships, suggesting shifts toward more progressive norms. Recognizing this diversity is essential; service providers who assume uniformity risk misreading individual households and missing opportunities for engagement.

Gender dynamics thus shape who enters the acculturation interface in the first place. They determine whose institutional social capital accumulates through service-provider interactions and whose access to programs, training, and market information depends on intrahousehold information relay.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined how culture and acculturation shape farmers' engagement with service providers and access to available resources. Grounded in Valdivia et al.'s (2012) framework on capital creation and complemented by Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of habitus and field, the analysis shows that Latino/a immigrant farmers draw on human, social, cultural, and economic capital to establish sustainable livelihoods.

Figure 1 synthesizes how the seven themes populate the bidirectional acculturation interface proposed in the Conceptual Framework: farmers arrive carrying dispositions shaped by prior institutional contexts, and service providers carry assumptions rooted in mainstream agricultural norms (Theme 1). The outcomes of their interactions depend on whether these cultural frames align or misalign within the U.S. agricultural field. Trust deficits from prior encounters with corruption and discrimination (Theme 2) make farmers hesitant to engage with formal institutions. Communication barriers (Theme 4) limit network expansion beyond family and friends. Program structures designed for conventional operations fail to recognize the distinctive livelihood strategies these farmers employ (Themes 3, 5, and 6), including incremental land acquisition, cash-based financing, and balancing off-farm employment with weekend farming. Gender dynamics (Theme 7) further shape who enters the interface in the first place. These dynamics interact through the feedback loops depicted in Figure 1: farmers who distrust institutions avoid documentation, which disqualifies them from programs, which reinforces perceptions that programs are "not for us."

The framework identifies two mechanisms operating at the interface. The *misalignment mechanism*, the dominant pattern in our findings, occurs when farmers' and service providers' culturally shaped habitus fail to align, blocking farmers' capacity to convert existing capitals into institutional support. The *alignment mechanism*, visible in moments such as the Sonora loan conversation, occurs when service providers recognize the capitals farmers bring and extend institutional access on that basis. The interface thus produces variable outcomes within the same institutional field depending on which mechanism operates.

Valdivia et al. (2012) found that immigrants who achieve integrated acculturation develop diverse networks that improve access to information and opportunity, while those experiencing exclusion remain in insular networks that limit economic mobility. Our findings align with this pattern: farmers whose social capital remains concentrated in family-based networks due to language barriers or negative context of reception face greater difficulty accessing institutionalized capital in the agricultural setting. Leiva et al. (2025) quantified these dynamics, demonstrating that both Anglo and Spanish acculturation are associated with a lower likelihood of market entry, while Anglo acculturation and negative perceptions of community context are each significantly linked to reductions in agricultural sales.

These findings have direct implications for how institutions (USDA agencies including the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, state departments of agriculture, university extension programs, the Farm Credit System, commercial agricultural lenders, and community-based organizations) serve Latino/a immigrant farmers. A first priority is cultural responsiveness. Training that builds cultural competence and cross-cultural communication skills, programming that accommodates relationship-building and flexible scheduling, and bilingual outreach are not peripheral accommodations but core requirements, particularly given that only about one-quarter of recent Latino/a immigrants are proficient in English (Pew Research Center, 2023). A second priority is the design of eligibility criteria. Program requirements built around large-scale, consolidated operations systematically exclude the small-acreage, geographically dispersed farms documented in this study. Revising acreage thresholds and documentation requirements to accommodate incremental land acquisition and dispersed holdings would better align institutional support with farmers' actual livelihood strategies (Leiva et al., 2025; Minkoff-Zern, 2025).

A third priority is financial access. Farmers' preference for cash transactions creates documentation barriers that disqualify them from many programs. Accessible financial products, such as microloans with simplified applications, Spanish-language financial literacy programming, and matching-funds structures aligned with incremental, self-financed land acquisition, would expand institutional access without demanding that farmers abandon strategies that have served them well.

A fourth priority is context of reception. This study found that single dismissive encounters, such as being ignored in a USDA office, reinforced institutional wariness in ways that shaped farmers'

subsequent engagement. Creating welcoming environments through inclusive programming, anti-discrimination training, and network-building opportunities that connect Latino/a farmers to established agricultural institutions addresses the relational foundation on which everything else depends.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the qualitative sample of 32 farmers, while appropriate for in-depth thematic analysis, reflects a specific context; transferability to other settings will depend on the degree of similarity between those contexts and the conditions described in this study. Second, the findings are grounded in a specific participant population (predominantly Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran immigrant farmers in Missouri) and should not be generalized to all Latino/a farming communities. States with longer-established Latino/a farming populations, such as California, Texas, or Florida, differ not only in agricultural conditions but also in the national origins, migration trajectories, and institutional contexts of their Latino/a farming communities. Third, the cross-sectional design captures a single point in time; farmers' relationships with institutions likely evolve as they accumulate experience and social capital. Fourth, translating qualitative data from Spanish to English introduces interpretive risk, particularly for culturally embedded terms such as *coyote* (intermediary) and *bordo* (water dam) whose connotations resist direct translation. This risk was mitigated by the use of native Spanish-English bilingual translators from the research team and by a collaborative verification process in which vocabulary questions were resolved through consultation among team members and colleagues rather than assumed.

Future research should extend beyond Missouri to validate these findings across diverse agricultural contexts, employ longitudinal designs to track how farmer-institution relationships develop over time, and include larger samples that permit quantitative analysis of factors predicting institutional engagement. Investigating the potential of digital technologies to enhance market accessibility for Latino/a farmers, while accounting for technology access barriers identified in this study, could provide valuable insights for program design.

As Missouri's Latino/a farming population continues to grow, the institutional choices made today will shape whether these farmers become fully integrated contributors to the state's agricultural economy or remain on its margins. The farmers in this study are not waiting for permission: they are buying land incrementally, building operations on evenings and weekends, and drawing on agricultural knowledge developed across generations in their home countries. What they lack is not motivation or agricultural knowledge, but access to institutionalized capital: information channels, program eligibility pathways, and service providers equipped to recognize their cultural and livelihood assets. Bridging these cultural divides requires more than translation. It requires institutions that accommodate farmers' actual operations and recognize the assets Latino/a immigrant farmers bring as contributions to the agricultural field rather than problems to be managed. As the U.S. farming population ages, supporting Latino/a immigrant farmers effectively matters not only for equity but for the practical future of U.S. agriculture.

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