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Coping Strategies of Farm and Ranch Men

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ABSTRACT

Although farm life has long been considered an ideal lifestyle for many Americans, changes in rural America now threaten both the concept and the reality. This article reports on a study of the coping strategies of 258 randomly selected farmers and ranchers in a midwest state.

These farmers and ranchers were reluctant to accept help from professionals, neighbors or relatives. They were confident in their abilities to seek independent solutions to their difficulties. These findings can be helpful to those consituents who serve the needs of farm and ranch men.

INTRODUCTION

For years, farm life was considered to be tranquil and relatively free from stress. This popular stereotype has been essentially destroyed in the 1980s due primarily to the agricultural economic crisis (Walker & Walker, 1987). According to Mooney (1986), "A crisis currently plagues that part of American agriculture commonly presented as the family farm stronghold" (p.449). Over 150,000 farmers are financially stressed (Mazie & Bluestone, 1987). Farming was ranked in the top 10 most stressful occupations according to a survey of 130 occupations conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (Smith, Colligan & Hurrel, 1977). In the U.S. Department's Farm Costs and Returns Survey, over 20 percent of the farms studied were highly indebted (owed two-thirds debt) in 1985 (Lipton, 1987). In addition, almost 40 percent of farm operator debt is owed by borrowers under moderate to severe economic stress (Freshwater & Trechter, 1987). Farming-related stress is associated with major changes in the farming lifestyle (Jevne, 1979).

Change is occurring at a rapid rate in rural America and it has been described as the "Farm Crisis" (Hennon & Marotz-Baden, 1987). The changes involve many areas of life — social, economic, occupation and family relationships. Frequently the changes are accompanied and complicated by "normative" life events, i.e., family members' physical illness, death or marriage of a family member. Rural residents are currently faced with unprecedented change, stress and demands to adapt and adjust their styles.

According to several researchers (Holmes & David, 1984; Lazarus, 1968; Platt, 1970; Schneider, 1984), change has a profound effect on the psychological functioning and occupational productivity of people. It is agreed by these researchers that change is accompanied by a necessity to adjust and adapt. In turn, the ability to adjust and adapt requires immediate and long-range planning. The planning must then be followed with action to implement the plans that have been made.

Bardwick (1979) purports that change forces people to reconceptualize their identity. This process involves a serious disruption in their lives and often provides a disturbing evaluation of their past, present

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and future. Resistance to change causes people to overlook opportunities for their future. However, Tamir (1982) believes that it is necessary to provide assistance to people that will help them reconstruct their minds to accommodate action oriented planning for their future, as necessitated by change. These researchers caution, however, that an accurate understanding of the people's perceptions of their situation is necessary before effective assistance can be given to reconstruct their mind set.

Platt (1970) and Schneider (1984) concur that several factors affect the ability of people to plan for their future, even when faced with the reality of the need to do so. One factor, the availability of options, is critical. However, the researchers caution that in spite of the availability of options, individuals facing change will often deny or resist these options. Lazarus (1968) cautioned that assistance to people at this stage must be based on an understanding of their perceptions of their life-style, how they view their options and what they think their life will be like if the options are implemented. McCubbin and Figley (1983) stated that any attempt to help families effectively deal with change must include a comprehensive understanding of their psychological perceptions and an understanding of the social support system to help them adjust to change.

The ability to effectively solve problems and to do necessary planning when confronted with change of a social, economic and psychological nature that will impact on lifestyle, has been shown to be related to life satisfaction and to one's perception of positive live events (Mancini, 1980-81). Farm families tend to be similar to non-farm families in terms of structure and basic lifestyle. However, Rosenblatt, Nevaldine, and Titus (1978) identified factors that may affect farm families' willingness and ability to adjust to life-style changes. These include: family members working together on a continuing and constant basis, thereby forming strong psychological ties to one another; non-separation of work and home space; and relative isolation caused by geographical distance.

Boss (1986) indicated that some personal traits of farm families may be barriers to coping with life-style changes and events. These traits include: 1) a fatalistic value orientation which makes the "hang on" because adversity (i.e., the weather, the market, interest rates) is their common lot that they have survived in the past and will survive again; 2) competition among farm groups and farmers rather than cooperation in plans to solve problems; 3) use of shame and guilt by the older generation to control the younger generation; and 4) personal silence and stoicism that prevents discussion and working through of problems.

In spite of these characteristics and traits, people do respond to problems and difficulties. However, their responses may vary from being productive to being destructive. It is important to assist and teach family members to respond in positive patterns to their problems. First, it is necessary to understand the response individuals and families are currently and habitually using.

Marotz-Baden and Colvin (1986) studied 202 rural families to determine their reactions and coping patterns. They found that the most frequently used patterns was to reframe the situation in a way in which they felt confident to handle it. The most infrequently used strategy was to seek help from professionals or government agencies in their communities.

Family scholars have attempted to identify differences in live events and changes that are stressful for farm and urban families. Marotz and Baden (1988) studied random samples of 94 urban and 83 rural farm couples. The urban couples faced a larger number of events and changes (i.e., stressors) in 12 months than the rural couples. The three most requently mentioned stressors for both couples were the same, the rankings however were different. For the farm couples, financial and business strains made up 35 percent of the stressors compared with only 23 percent for the urban families. Intra-family strains and tensions were reported by 31 percent of the farm and 32 percent of the urban families. Work-family (related to job change, addition of work or unemployment) stressors were reported by 13 percent of the farm families and 21 percent of the urban families.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The research reported here was a study to identify how farm and ranch men respond to problems or difficulties.

Instrument

The Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales (F-COPES) (McCubbin & Patterson, 1981) was administered to 258 randomly selected men who were currently owners and operators of farms or ranches in a midwest state. The F-COPES is a 30 item self-report instrument designed to identify problem-solving and

behavioral strategies used by families in response to problems or difficulties. The respondents are asked to indicate which strategy describe their responses to problems or difficulties. The F-COPES has eight scales indicating coping patterns used by the respondent. The scale patterns are (1) confidence in handling problems, (2) reframing family problems, (3) family passivity, (4) church/religious resources, (5) extended family, (6) friends, (7) neighbors and (8) community resources.

Subjects

The average age of respondents was 48.7 years and they had lived in the same state an average of 47.3 years. Eighty-five percent of the respondents had lived their entire life in the same state. The respondents had been married an average of 23.87 years. Approximately half (48.2%) had farms under 1,000 acres. Twenty-seven percent were employed either part or full time off the farm. Close to half (48.2%) of the respondents had a 1983 income after expenses of $12,000 or less; only 15.6 percent had incomes over $30,000. One-fourth of the respondents had not completed high school with 30.9 percent having completed only high school. Twenty-six percent had some college or a two-year degree; 16.7 percent had at least a 4 year college degree. Most (64.2%) were protestant with 31.5 percent Catholic; 38.1 percent were of Scandinavian origin and 40.8 percent were of German or German-Russian origin.

Results

Having faith in God, accepting stressful events as a fact of life, accepting that difficulties occur unexpectedly, facing the problems "head on" and trying to get the solution right away, and knowing that they have the strength within their own family to solve their problems were the most frequently used coping methods reported by the farm men who completed F-COPES.

Eighty-seven percent reported they responded to problems or difficulties by having faith in God. Sixty-two percent reported that they participated in church activities, while 70 percent said they attended church services. These responses suggest that their faith is a critical source of support. This finding also supports that of Marotz-Baden and Colvin (1986) who observed that seeking spiritual support was a top preference for coping of rural people. However, only 33 percent said they sought advice from a minister. The minister appears to play a much less significant role as a coping resource. While the reason for this difference in related sources of support was not investigated, we might hypothesize that ministers are not perceived by farmers as "understanding" the agricultural problems, therefore they are not sought out for advice.

The farm men did not generally respond to problems or difficulties by seeking advice or assistance from anyone. Only 24 percent said they asked neighbors for favors and assistance, 26 percent said they would receive gifts from neighbors, 45 percent would share their difficulties with their relatives, but only 36 percent would seek their relatives' advice and even fewer, only 24 percent, would ask relatives how they felt about the problems they are facing. Thirty-five percent sought information and advice from the family doctor and 30 percent would seek professional counseling. A slightly higher percentage, 43 percent, would seek assistance from community agencies and programs designed to help families in their situation.

Friends were perceived as better sources of support than relatives. Half (50%) of the farmers would seek encouragement and support from friends and 52 percent said they would seek information and advice from persons who have faced the same or similar problems. Sixty-four percent said they would share their concerns with close friends.

The farmers' independence and self-reliance were evident in their reluctance to ask for or accept help and advice, and surfaced again in the high percentage who indicated they could deal with problems alone. Seventy-eight percent said they faced their problems "head on" and tried to get solutions right away. Seventy-two percent said they knew they had the strength within their own family to solve their problems. Sixty percent responded by showing they are strong, while 68 percent believed they could handle their own problems. Sixty-eight percent also said they responded by defining the problem in a more positive way so they would not become too discouraged.

However, members of the farm community may not be perceived as supportive by families who are losing, or on the verge of losing, their farms (Wright & Rosenblatt, 1987). Non-help may be interpreted as help, the community may be viewed as breaking down, the misfortune may be diagnosed as contagious, and neighbors may feel safer by distancing themselves.

The farm men were not passive when it came to handling problems. Only nine percent believed their problems would go away if they waited long enough. However, 19 percent "escaped" by watching television. Twenty-three percent believed luck played a part in

how well they were able to solve family problems and 22 percent felt that no matter what they did to prepare they would still have difficulty handling problems.

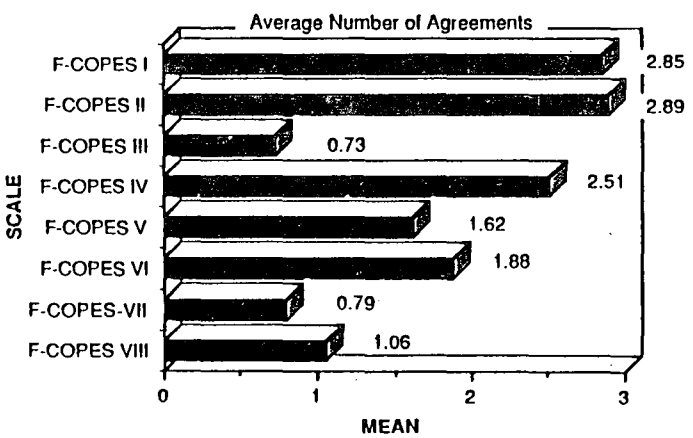
Participating in physical exercise was not a popular method of responding to problems. Less than one-fourth of the farmers said they exercised to stay fit and reduce tension. Farmers may feel that they get enough exercise through their daily work and chores; thus, "formal" exercise would appear to be superfluous.

PATTERNS OF COPING STRATEGIES

The number of statements that each respondent agreed with within each of the eight scales was computed. The higher the number, the greater the use of the coping strategy. The largest number of agreements was found on the first two scales, I. Confidence in Family Problem Solving and II. Reframing Family Problems. Forty-one percent of all respondents agreed with all four of the statements within Scale 1; 35 percent agreed with all four of the statements within Scale II. An average of 2.85 statements within Scale I were agreed to by the respondents; Scale II had an average of 2.89 statements agreed to by the respondents. The lowest average was associated with Scale III, Family Passivity; only one percent of the respondents agreed to all four statements with that scale (see Table 1).

Table 1

F-Copes Scales



In interpreting the results of this study, the overlap of groups must be kept in mind. Those respondents with less education tend to be older and tend to have lower incomes. Further, older respondents have older children. Many of the significant results are consistent with this overlap. For example, older respondents and respondents with less education both tended to indicate they participated in church activities, sought advice from a minister and sought information from their family doctor.

IMPLICATIONS

The strongest implications from this study of how farm men respond to their problems and difficulties appear to be for those people and agencies involved in developing and implementing programs to assist farmers in stress alleviation and coping techniques. The following suggestions are offered:

1. Farmers and ranchers will be reluctant to accept "help" or "advice" from professionals, neighbors or relatives. However, they will be more likely to be receptive to friends and someone who has faced the same type of problems.

2. In spite of their reluctance to accept help or advice, farmers and ranchers may be willing to share their difficulties through writing or talking, especially with friends. Therefore, opportunities for discussion and expression of frustrations need to be provided.

3. Farmers and ranchers are confident in their own abilities and strengths, and are willing to act to find solutions. Therefore, capitalize and build on those strengths. Enhance their self-esteem, involve them in the solutions to their problems. Show them how they can help each other through support, listening and cooperation.

4. Farm men and ranchers are not a homogeneous group. Likewise, they do not respond to problems and difficulties in identical ways. Factors such as age, income, education and size of their farming operation appear to play significant roles in response patterns. In some communities, program planners may also need to be aware of ethnic and religious differences in coping strategies.

In summary, farm men and ranchers do not appear to be receptive to programs designed, planned and implemented by "experts" to "help" them. Their independence can be a positive resource for involving them at the grassroots level in planning and implementing assistance programs. Assistance to farm men should be to "help them to help themselves."

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