

## FARM FAMILY DISPLACEMENT AND STRESS

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The psychology of more and more is not working for many farm families today. Although they may have more land, more machines, and more production per acre, and although the bottom line may be written in black ink for the luckiest of them, there are a lot of farm families who are in trouble. They are in trouble because of the stress and economic hazards that characterize agriculture today. They are in trouble because family farms generate all kinds of problems, not the least of which are those that stem from having three — and often now even four — generations of decision makers in one family. They are in trouble because the very characteristics that have made them good farmers are now barriers to coping with economic stress and the need for change.

Why do families in stress resist change when it appears that a change would, in the long run, be more positive than staying where they are? Why do families stay in a situation that is economically dangerous? Do they think they can beat it? Do they still have an ounce of hope? Or do they have a high degree of denial regarding the reality of their problem. All too frequently the farm family's fear of change is greater than their fear of the possibility of foreclosure.

Farm families are not ordinarily passive. They can and do act when they want to. They work hard, harder than most of us. But they are persevering and that has *both* positive and negative effects for the farm family.

On the positive side, their rigid adherence to making something work, to holding back the floods, to planting another crop even when there is a fickle market, has worked over the long run. The American farm family produces more food than any other farm population in the world. They are damned good at what they do. The farm family has honored the soil and preserved it because they know it belongs to their future generations. They have made their living the hard way, with small dollars. Even when the corporations have encroached, they have persevered when, in fact, they could have made more money by selling. They have in their stubborn way preserved a way of life that is precious in America. We can, however, no longer romanticize that way of life. The agriculturists currently at greatest risk are the small family

farmers who are short of capital, long on debts, and unable to meet the needs of a changing world-wide market. A decade ago their local banks would have extended their credit line without hesitation, and if the weather was good and prices held up, they would have had time to work themselves out of their debt. Today, however, rural banks are also in trouble and farm families have nowhere to turn for the help and time they need to regain their equilibrium.

My experience with these families is based on firsthand as well as clinical and theoretical knowledge. I want to emphasize this point so you will know why I feel competent to talk about farm family stress. Let me tell you a little about my background.

To start with, I own a 185-acre dairy farm in Wisconsin that falls into the category of high risk — too small to make a profit and too big for a hobby farm. I will try to sell now, however, although that may mean splitting up the acreage and taking a loss. Perhaps more important is the fact that I grew up on a family farm. My father came from Switzerland as a young agriculturist and became an American farmer. He and my mother rented land until they could afford to buy their own farm. We children grew up working alongside them on a small Wisconsin dairy farm. If we were poor, I never knew it. We worked hard together. My parents shared the worries and learned to interpret the market ups and downs, but we all shared a lot of good times and fun as a family. My early life was much like “The Waltons” on television.

While I was in high school I was very active, like other daughters of farm families, in Future Homemakers of America, and when the principal said that I should go to college, home economics was a natural choice of fields. My socialization made that choice inevitable for me. In our community, which was a Swiss-American rural village, a woman’s primary role was expected to be “Kinder, Kirche, and Kuche.” Raising children, being active in church affairs, and cooking were the centers of her life. According to that script, home economics as a college major was not too far from what I was supposed to be doing. After graduation, I taught home economics at the secondary as well as the adult vocational level. My first job as a home economist, by the way, was for the George Barden Program; I went out to farms in the summertime and visited with students and their families. Subsequently, I moved on to the University of Wisconsin, where I became interested in family research.

One of my graduate professors at the University of Wisconsin was Carl Whitaker, a pioneer in family therapy. I told him that I wanted to be a family life educator, not a family therapist. He said that was all right and then went on to say, “If you want to learn about families, the best way is to *listen* to them; listen to what they say as well as to what they do not say.” That is a point I want to emphasize here today.

Many of you are in the position now that I was in ten years ago

when I started graduate work. You have a lot of professional knowledge but you feel you do not have the training to listen to families in trouble. There was a time when clinical psychologists also used to think it took professional training to know how to listen to people. But that is no longer so, and although the fact may have been kept secret from a lot of people, in Minnesota the secret is out. People just like you in Minnesota are listening and bringing help to farm families who are getting close to the end of their resources. The extension specialists who are listening in Minnesota are *not* professionally trained in suicide prevention, finance management, or family stress, but when they get a farm husband or wife in their office or home who is depressed and/or crying, they are able to respond empathetically and to refer the individual to the right place for professional help or peer support. The listeners even include bankers. In fact, we are now doing workshops with bankers, helping them to learn how to cope with their clients who are on the edge of disaster, and with their own guilt in relation to that situation. What do you do when the man sitting in front of your desk is so depressed he cannot respond to you? Or he begins to cry? Or what do you do if a couple comes in to apply for a loan or if they come in for advice, and you can tell that they have been fighting and that perhaps a divorce is brewing? If the family does break up, the farm is lost; even the best of properties cannot survive being split up because one person then owes the other person half the assessed value.

If you are a member of the extension service, you may be the only person right now to whom personal problems are exposed. They trust you. You have served their needs before. So although you may feel that you are not equipped to handle troubled people, you cannot now turn your back on the rural men, women, and children who are carrying the load. I am not saying that you should do the counseling. But you are the person who is there. You can listen. You can touch the man's or woman's arm. You can say, "I'll get some information for you in town and get back to you later today with the phone number of somebody who *can* help."

What I have just described is a function being performed almost every day by extension personnel in the state of Minnesota. They are part of several programs going on there that are very nontraditional. The people at the University of Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service did not choose to go that way; we were forced into devising the program by the desperate needs encountered in various rural communities around the state. Nevertheless, we came up with some good programs and some good information which, I believe, are creative in dealing with current farm family stress.

How did we specifically come up with the programs and techniques that seem to be working in Minnesota? To answer that question, I want to describe one program that is presently in place there for fam-

ilies who are in trouble and are being displaced. It is called "Helping Families Deal With Change." Then I want to tell you about family stress theory, which provides the foundation for the programs. And I will finish by focusing on policy recommendations that I think are absolutely necessary to help farm families who are being moved or phased out. What we are doing in Minnesota, in fact, comes under the heading of "crisis intervention." We are helping people to learn to make new kinds of decisions and to solve new problems. We are activating community leaders who also serve as role models. Those are powerful activities in themselves.

Among the people who made the program possible in Minnesota is Richard Sauer, the Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics of the University of Minnesota, and Director of the University's Agricultural Experiment Station. I need to tell you that the unique philosophy of the Agricultural Experiment Station in Minnesota has made it possible for a larger than average percentage of its funds to be used for research on families; that is, for research on human resources in the farm industry. I believe the Minnesota philosophy that makes such research support possible should be replicated throughout the United States because when the human elements on the farm are in trouble, the superiority of genetic products — animals and plants — means nothing. Human resources matter, the farm family matters, and serious academic attention should be paid to them. Dr. Sauer has supported a research program in Minnesota that makes it possible for us to do so. Our Dean of the College of Home Economics, Dr. Keith McFarland, also encourages and supports family research. He has supported and nurtured the Department of Family Social Science to become one of the strongest family science departments in the United States. Finally, the person who was most specifically responsible for creating this new program for helping farm families deal with change is Dr. Shirley Baugher, Associate Dean of Home Economics Extension. She views the extension specialist in a new way, as the key resource person in a community of many professionals and lay persons, all of whom want to team up to help families in trouble in their particular community. She is not traditional in her view of boundaries between agricultural and home economics extension, including community professionals in law, mental and physical health, religion, and education. I find that situation very hopeful. One person alone cannot alleviate farm stress. It is a team project and the workshops and programs on farm stress must include the whole team, that is, local mental health professionals, bankers, lawyers, clergy, and teachers who work with the young.

The Minnesota Family Stress Program does not exist in a vacuum. We are aware that we as extension specialists must be more political than we have been. It is impossible to remain neutral when you are talking with a farm wife who has a black eye and obviously has been beaten up, or when you know that a child is being incestuously abused

because of high familial stress or because of a warped belief system maintained by generations of isolation on the farm.

In fact, Minnesota law requires us *not* to be neutral. If I come upon a man, woman, or child who is abused or dangerously depressed and nonfunctional, I cannot turn my back on that person — morally or legally. If I am coming to such a person's farm with some technical information, that may be the time to forget the technical information and instead use the skills acquired in the family stress training workshops. When an individual in the family is obviously depressed, suicidal, or dysfunctional, the technical information can wait.

### **“How Families Deal With Change”**

Our program in Minnesota has indeed taken a nontraditional approach to the extension service and to troubled rural communities. Even its start was nontraditional and nonagricultural. During the summer of 1984, there was a lot of trouble up in the rural area of Minnesota called the Mesabi Iron Range. It is west of Duluth and once was the leading producer of iron ore in the country. In the 1970s when the large deposits of ore were becoming exhausted, the industry turned to the mining of taconite, but by 1984 that, too, had become a dying industry. All told, hundreds of thousands of people on the Range were out of work and had no prospects for employment as miners. For many of them, especially those who were third- and fourth-generation miners, working in the large open pit mines had been a way of life as well as a source of income. They did not want to move. They regarded themselves as “Range people” and as tough; they had a “we can do it” and “we can solve anything” attitude. During 1984, however, it became clear that that attitude was not going to work up there any longer. The Iron Range would not come alive again.

The men and women of the Iron Range were in the same situation that small and marginal farmers in the United States now find themselves in 1985. The one-family farm has become dangerously unstable, if not obsolete. Displacement is inevitable for many. No matter how much you may like life on a family farm, you can no longer make a living solely that way. Back in 1984, however, our primary concern was for the people on the Range. A group of us got together on the St. Paul Campus of the University of Minnesota during the summer to devise some way to help them. We were researchers and specialists and agents from the university extension service and the regional extension service. Fortunately, one of the participants was a local extension agent who, it turned out, knew the Iron Range better than the rest of us. In retrospect, I believe that that local extension agent was the most valuable person in our planning group. In addition to her own knowledge of the Iron Range and the needs of the people up there, she could call upon the services of local residents — bartenders, beauticians, teachers, lawyers, and ministers, anyone who had contacts

with troubled people — to form a local planning committee. By the way, the bartenders proved the most useful. There was an alcohol problem up on the Range when the mines shut down. It probably happens in other places as well; when a man cannot go to work, he gets out of the house by going to a bar and meeting his friends, thinking he can regain a feeling of “manliness” and control by drinking. Many people unfortunately find in drink a way to forget their troubles. In reality, drinking is a coping mechanism that becomes a problem instead of a solution.

During our organizational meetings we talked and we brainstormed: What could we do to ease the strain of the people on the Iron Range and to help them accept the fact that things were changing? We planned a workshop -- “How Families Deal with Change” — for November. Several weeks later it was brought to our attention that we had scheduled the workshop during deer hunting season. University people, you know, are sometimes out of touch with the realities of real rural life. We changed the date to December, although with much concern about possible weather problems.

When I went up to northeast Minnesota for that first workshop, I remember it was very, very cold and snowing. I wondered if anyone would have the temerity to come out for a workshop. The roads were very bad and getting worse by the hour. The local committee members who had planned the meeting were also worried. They had promised the workshop organizers an attendance of 50 people; with that weather, I thought we would be lucky to get 25. Imagine our astonishment when people started pouring in! By the time we were ready to start the meeting, we had an audience of over 200 who wanted to learn about “How Families Deal with Change.”

Do you remember in home economics extension when we would always look to see if any men were present, and how gratifying it was to spot one or two? In that first workshop that snowy day on the Range, there was no point in even counting; even from a cursory observation it was evident that the audience consisted of almost equal numbers of men and women. From what I could see, there were ministers, lawyers, managers, bankers, educators, homemakers, unemployed miners, and union leaders. There were medical people and mental health professionals as well.

The people who were there that day were wonderful. You could feel their pain, both as professionals and as private citizens, and they hung onto every word that was said. They were hungry for information. I wondered at how much it must have taken to get that many unemployed miners to attend a workshop on stress in view of the stereotype which they had always tried to project before: the “we can solve anything” attitude that forbade reaching for outside help.

One of the most moving stories I heard was from one of the miners who was determined to cope with the changes on the Iron Range. He

accepted the fact that the old way of a miner's life — his, his father's and his grandfather's — was finished and he had decided to go into nurse's training; he figured that health care was one employment area that would not disappear as iron mining had. I cite his example because one of the primary barriers to coping with displacement is the community attitude toward what a "real" man and a "real" woman is. He took a lot of teasing about his decision to go into training for what had traditionally been a woman's job, but he just brushed off the comments by saying, "Yeah, but I'm going to eat." And he was right.

I want to digress for a moment to point out that one of the primary obstacles that displaced farm families have to overcome is this rigid conception of what it means to be a "real man" or a "real woman." When a family is in trouble, such gender-biased definitions restrict its coping possibilities. When a wife has to earn the living for a while, it does not make the husband less of a man or the wife less of a woman. So what if he has to take a job where he earns less than she, or he has to do the child care to free her to work, or both have to work outside the home in order to make ends meet? If a man has always prided himself on his ability to provide for his family, or if he comes out of a tradition that defines a successful man as one whose wife does not have to work, then the changed circumstances can create an unimaginable amount of stress in him and his family. Not only is he stressed by what he may consider his personal failure as a farmer, but he is also shamed by being judged an inadequate man because he cannot support his wife and family. Our biggest challenge then as university researchers and extension specialists is to bring about an attitudinal as well as a technological change if we want to ease the stress in the farm family today.

To get back to our workshops on "Helping Families Deal With Change," let me tell you how they were structured. We found that it was essential to have two keynote speakers: a woman and a man. I believe it is essential to have the keynote messages given by a woman and a man because the appearance of both on the platform is both visual and symbolic. Family stress problems are not just a woman's issue or a man's issue; both men and women suffer family stress problems, and thus it is important to emphasize this fact by having the keynote speeches delivered by a male-female team. These opening addresses, followed by questions and answers, usually took up the morning. I usually started it off by giving one keynote address on farm family stress, and Ron Pitzer followed with another. Both of these are available on videotape.

In the afternoon, the large group broke down into small workshops on different topics that were led by local professionals rather than university people. Please note that only the keynoters should be university people. The workshops must be led by local community professionals. If we from the university come in from the outside with the

whole show, it does not build a strong base to leave behind in the community after the professors go home. We worked with those community professionals the night before the workshop so that they knew our theoretical approach to family stress. We also listened to their points of view and case studies of local families in trouble. This was a way to make the community support system stronger. After we went home, they could keep right on working in their community with the people who needed help and with those who could provide that help in an ongoing way.

After we held our first workshop on the Range on that cold day, the extension service began getting requests from all over the state of Minnesota to repeat the workshop. We gave the stress management training workshop four more times, although in agricultural and not mining areas. Nevertheless, we used the same format that we had used for the original workshop. The family stress theory remained the same, but the examples changed. The local experts were, of course different, too. The basic format remained powerful in its impact on the community. The best part was that the training workshop had a ripple effect in the community that went on and on after the university team did its work and went home. Let me give you an example.

Since the workshop helps families deal with the idea of change, a number of requests have come into the extension service at the university from various communities on specific related ideas that they want developed. One such idea covers displacement and relocation. The local professionals found that a lot of people did not know how to move and that this was one factor that prevented them from considering moving as an option. They had never changed dwellings. If you have lived in your house for many years, perhaps even generations, you have developed a style of living that may be difficult to uproot. You may have to be taught what to do to break that pattern and how to prepare to set up in another location. A booklet called *Farm Family Relocation* covering this problem has now been published by the university extension service. It contains down-to-earth, practical information, e.g., empty the gas cans before you pack them, clean the drapes and rugs so they will be ready to install in the new house, call the telephone company to disconnect the service, and give the post office a forwarding address. The publication also contains information on what to do about small children. Do not pack all their toys; let them carry a few things in their laps during the trip. It also points out the importance of having farewell rituals. If you do not, you will have more unresolved grieving to do later. The dislocated family needs to have farewell parties and goodbyes and perhaps some tears. They need to set up bridges to keep themselves connected with relatives and friends they will miss — for example, a tape recorder system, letter-writing circle, or group telephone calls, although the latter can be expensive. Such a resource is most helpful to any family that is unaccustomed to relocating.



Another booklet that has been developed is on decision making. The process of decision making is indeed one that can be taught. It is based on the cost-benefit model that was developed by, and is used by, economists. One literally makes a decision on the basis of whether the benefits that can be anticipated from an action are more or less equal to the costs that are entailed. When families are being displaced, the process of decision making is very important in how well they manage.

### **Family Stress Research and Theory Being Applied**

Let's look again at the program we started that cold day up on the Range, but now in order to make a new point. The program is an example of basic research that was subsequently applied; that is, put to work to help reduce stress for rural families in Minnesota. In the family field, we do not make as much of a distinction between basic and applied research, perhaps because the field is so new. For example, the idea of "boundary ambiguity" as a major family stressor grew out of clinical observation, out of watching what happened in families when the membership was unclear. Over the ten years that I have been conducting studies on the concept, it has come to appear that it is an important predictor of the level of family stress that family is experiencing, irregardless of the event. Families can handle almost anything if they know what the facts are. However, if they experience an event, a situation, or problem, but cannot get the facts in which the problem is imbedded, the uncertainty creates a high degree of stress.

For example, suppose a doctor were to tell you that you have a disease and then said, "But I cannot tell you any more about it." You would become very highly stressed, I'm sure. This is what happens with Alzheimer's disease. It is one of the diseases that medical researchers do not know much about now, and we are concerned, therefore, about how it affects the caregiver and family. When a person has this disease, he or she is physically present but at the same time is psychologically not there; it is a highly ambiguous situation for the family and thus highly stressful.

Farming, from what I have observed and experienced, is also a highly ambiguous situation. Except for the fact that cows have to be milked twice a day, everything else appears to be ambiguous. Crops are good *if* the weather cooperates, and profits are high *if* the market does not drop. It is impossible to predict what the international market will do and, in fact, you cannot even predict what will happen nationally. Currently, consumer tastes have created another ambiguous area since the diet of Americans is changing. We do not eat as much red meat as we used to because researchers in blood cholesterol have encouraged us not to. So we are eating lots of chicken and turkey instead of steak. This comes as a bitter surprise to beef farmers.

All these directives have made the process of production very am-

biguous for farm families. This uncertainty of the facts in their lives may be what makes farmers very fatalistic in their value orientation. Being fatalistic makes sense when you cannot get clear facts about your situation and when you have no control over your economic destiny. If something does not go right this year, you wait for the changes that next year will bring. You have faith that things will turn out for the better no matter how bleak they look now.

This very fatalism that ordinarily enables farmers to cope with the uncertainties of weather and markets now may be dysfunctional, however. Societal and economic conditions that made the small family farm possible and successful are no longer a reality. The farmers who are sitting around fatalistically waiting for things to change may have to change themselves instead. As extension specialists, you have to take the farm families who are holding onto dysfunctional, fatalistic attitudes and explain to them that they must make an active decision rather than wait passively for some change that may never come.

What we can do as specialists, I think, is to give these farm families as many facts about their economic situation as possible. We can give them information on how to relocate, retrain, or make decisions. We can help them to look at their situations from a different perspective, long range and short range. If you cannot change a situation, a therapist would say, you can at least reframe it. That is what the Iron Range miner did who decided to go into nurse's training.

Members of military families have often told me that they look upon relocation as an adventure. They have reframed what could be a major stressor event. Some of these families have moved 15 or 20 times during the course of the soldier's career. Before a move, one wife said, the whole family goes to the library to get all the information they can on the town they are moving to (for example, what interesting sites are there or what the town is famous for) so that on moving day they have something to look forward to in order to balance what they are losing. They then know what is coming. They are sad about leaving the present post, but their anticipatory behavior is like building a bridge; it is a way of trying to reframe the situation and to get all the facts they can about their new situation.

Families that move a lot appear to have weaker extended relationships but stronger nuclear ties. This may be a new concept for some farm families, at least in the Midwest where families have tended not to move. The extended family is the family people talk about first. Three generational families probably all go to the same church every Sunday and then eat together afterwards. They spend the holidays together; in fact, they would not think of being away from their extended family on holidays.

Because of the rural values of the extended farm family, thinking of being thousands of miles apart is very frightening for people who have never lived that way. We have to explain to them that the nuclear

family will become stronger when they do not have their extended family around them. We have to help them create new holiday rituals for the nuclear family that do not include going to Grandma's and Grandpa's house. They may have to reframe the new rituals to justify them, for example by reminding the children that Grandma's house was getting too full to hold all those relatives anyhow.

Some years ago I was doing family therapy in a rural area in southern Wisconsin. I remember three adult sisters who came to see me; they did not have a major problem, just ordinary, everyday family stress that all of us have from time to time. (Family therapy, by the way, can deal with family problems that are not necessarily psychiatric.) The three sisters — they were all married — came to see me in November and they said they had a big problem: "We have always gone to Grandma's house for dinner, but there are now 72 of us. That's too many for her to handle, even if we all pitch in and do the cooking and cleaning. What shall we do? We do not want to hurt her feelings by not showing up."

It took us a couple of sessions to discover some options. The first was to rent the town hall for the extended family gathering. The second was for each nuclear family to develop some private rituals of its own, such as opening their presents at home or creating a ritual around a holiday meal like brunch or supper; and then afterward they could go to the open house party with Grandma and Grandpa at the town hall where everyone could visit together for a few hours. This is the kind of family stress problem that we might have with farm family relocation. Family rituals are very, very important and must be maintained or adapted, especially when a major relocation is planned.

As we developed some handouts for the family stress management workshops, we focused, not only on ambiguity, but on denial. That is one of the most important and least talked about concepts in stress: the family (or one member of the family) just refuses to recognize that a problem exists. You see it often in families where a loss is imminent but the family as a whole (or certain members) acts as if it were not happening. The extension specialist can be very important in breaking the denial of such families in order to help them begin the coping process.

The agent up on the Range in Minnesota had an idea derived from the media (and that we developed further) that challenges people to face reality. We made a lot of little cards that we distributed all around town: in the laundromat, in the beauty shop, in the taverns, and on the store counters. Each contained a message on a theme. One of the cards dealing with denial said, "Thinking it won't happen won't make the situation go away." As people read it, they wondered what it meant. When they turned the card over, they found one or more short sentences explaining the short message. The cards were interest catchers. "We can cope with almost anything as long as we have the facts. That

is true for losses in one's work as well as personal life. Get as many facts about what has happened to you and then face those facts head on." The concept comes out of coping theory: "You can't start the coping process until you admit you have a problem. If you say things like, 'Oh, farming is a way of life; it's never going to disappear, nothing will ever change,' you are not even able to begin coping with change."

The most important part of these small message cards was the blank space on the back where the local extension office stamped its phone number. We did not print that information because we distributed the cards all over the state of Minnesota and we wanted each county office to stamp on its own number. What happened was that people carried these cards around in their pockets or purses, having seen them around town; and when they realized that they were in trouble, they would call the phone number on the back. This meant, of course, that the extension office was called upon to perform in a new way. It now gets calls from all kinds of people who are in all kinds of trouble: child abuse, alcoholism, budget problems, marital problems, etc. The extension office therefore now lists all the places in the community where experts and peer supports can be found and where particular kinds of help can be obtained. For example, the extension office can tell people where to go to get financial counseling, drug and alcohol abuse counseling, and the names and phone numbers of other people who can supply help on nutrition or even on writing a new resume for applying for a job. Whatever resources exist in the area are listed on that information sheet by service and phone number, and contact names are given.

The extension office, therefore, has become many things to many people. The county extension office becomes a clearing house or focal point in the community. The extension service has functioned in that capacity in the past, so it is the logical network to take on the services in this new and critical area. You are there, you are respected, you are liked, and you are known to be a knowledge source. The difference is that the knowledge you hand out now is information on where to get more help from others in the community. That is not, of course, all you do, but it is an important new piece of it.

Essentially, the extension service is running the most successful human service and research network in the world. You are part of the community and people know and like you. They look to you for help, so you probably would be called before the local psychiatrist or some other professional. The program works because of your closeness to the people.

On the basis of the feedback, it seems that the first beneficiaries of the family stress management training workshops were, in fact, the community professionals who attended. The success of the program depended upon the trickle-down theory. We from the university extension service worked with the county extension agents and local lay

people and professionals by conducting workshops that strengthened the local support systems for rural families. These support systems, in turn, helped to make the community more stable and/or helped families to relocate when it was necessary. Our help was indirect, not direct.

A demand has developed for this program outside the boundaries of the state. At present there is a North Central United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Regional Experiment Station Project being conducted on "Family Stress Management in Mid-Life Years." The states involved in the project are Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, and Nebraska. Many of the findings from this project are being disseminated through videotape, fact sheets, and materials like the kind we distributed at that first family stress workshop. We are producing regional packages to share across all states where rural families are in trouble. For the first time in my years of research, my findings will be disseminated by film as well as the printed page.

One of the early findings from the regional project is that differences may not be found just between rural and urban families, but more strongly, between the husbands and wives in all families. For example, mid-life women may cope better with change than do mid-life men. In hard times, women appear to be more adaptable and flexible than the men. They seem to adapt to their roles more easily than do men. That is, they can go out and get a job and become family providers, whereas it appears to be much harder for mid-life men to take care of kids, clean the house, and get supper on the table.

One of the most successful family structures to cope with hard times over a long period has been that of the black American family, where typically both husband and wife share both instrumental and expressive roles. That is, there is less emphasis on male versus female roles and more emphasis on survival by getting the job done, no matter who does it. In the past we have undersold that family structure as dysfunctional. Yet, given the economically stressed environment in which the black family has often found itself, that family structure has been very functional for survival. The woman earned the living and the man helped take care of children. Men and women did whatever had to be done and paid no attention to what was prescribed as masculine or feminine.

When I spoke to black students even a decade ago about sex roles, they did not understand the distinction between male and female roles. As far as they were concerned, there was work that had to be done for the black family to survive and it did not matter who did what; if you were there, you did the job. It did not matter if you were a man or a woman. You could be masculine without having to be the sole breadwinner in the family, and you could be feminine even if you were the breadwinner. They were able to transcend traditional family sex role

delineations which we now know create serious barriers for families who are trying to cope with stress and change.

### **Barriers to Coping with Change**

We see a lot of resistance to change in farm families even when it appears that the change would be a positive step in the long run. This resistance is found in all people, not just farm families. Most of us do not like change, and we resist it despite the handwriting on the wall. One has to admire the irrational perseverance of these farm families. They keep trying in the face of a reality that clearly tells them it will not work. But these traits also become barriers to coping for farm families in trouble. Let me list these barriers.

1. First, a high focus on a fatalistic value orientation creates a barrier to coping with stress and change. The farm family has hung on when they perhaps should have looked for other options. As I said before, one cannot farm without being fatalistic. The family cannot control the weather, the market, interest rates, foreign relations, or even the milking schedule. Instead, the farm family adapts to the weather, the cows, the market, and foreign policy. None of these things being in control, the family comes to believe things will work out. It is the only way they can survive this way of life. Thus the fatalism becomes a major coping mechanism for the farm family.

But it also can become a cause of more stress, a dysfunctional coping mechanism, when it is overused. When it is used in the face of a reality that calls for change, a passive acceptance of what is happening is not functional.

2. In addition to fatalism there is the problem of the farmer's "machismo." Here I consciously refer to the man on the farm who too often tries to keep up with the other men in acquisition of tractors, livestock, acres, number of silos, and bigger and better trucks. Rather than support each other, farmers compete with each other, driving each other farther and farther into debt. Some bankers merely feed this machismo. This was especially true several years ago when land prices were high. It did not take much convincing to tell a young farmer that he needed blue silos or gigantic tractors to match his neighbor's. Rather than discourage machismo in the farmer, lenders and salesmen and even relatives and friends encouraged the farmer to go for it — to have the biggest tractor, the biggest herd, the biggest acreage. We might do better to encourage a friendly helpfulness between farmers rather than this "John Wayne attitude," an attitude that has done many in. Bigger is not always better. More may end up as less these days. It is not farming to make money; rather, it is farming to stay afloat.

In my work with farm families, I have found that the critical factor in displacement is loss. Not just the loss of a job, but loss of friends and families, loss of a house, a school, family doctors whom you liked,

and dentists and pediatricians with whom you interacted as patients and friends. There is also the loss of a minister or pastor who is regarded as a fixed member of your extended community. You can list all kinds of specifics, but theoretically the one common denominator is loss. Grieving is inevitable and natural after such losses. That grieving must be supported rather than aborted. In our society, unfortunately, men have not been taught to grieve; indeed, it has been considered unmasculine for men to cry, to be stressed, or to show their feelings. In the current environment of farm family displacement, the suppression of these behaviors is totally dysfunctional. The freedom to express feelings and emotions may even be one of the reasons that women live longer than men.

3. In addition to a fatalistic value orientation and a belief in machismo, shame and guilt also become blocks to coping for the farm family. Surprisingly, this attitude is (in my opinion) coming from the older generation of farm families. They think they are helping, but they are not. Shame and guilt are being heaped on the farm family instead. When someone is accused of failing because it is his own fault or he showed poor management, a person who is already going down the tubes is essentially being shamed and blamed even more. The grandparent generation may be increasing the guilt and shame from inside the family. The older people say, "We did it during the depression, so why can't you do it now? If you just did it our way." What this older generation does not understand is that it is not the same as it was during the depression. The situation is very different now. Banks were pushing loans a few years ago. The best of loan officers as well as farmers fell for it. Machinery, technology, and land costs skyrocketed. Our parents cannot even relate to an 18 percent interest rate. We need to make them realize that the situation is different. They must be told to stop the shaming.

Whenever I have seen suicidal situations, the shaming and guilt has been extraordinary, both within the family and within the community. In America we like success, we like the Horatio Alger, Jr. myth. When we see someone failing or losing the farm, it is our natural inclination to stay away from that family as if they had some incurable and contagious disease. But that is absolutely the wrong attitude to take. We need to visit the people who are being overwhelmed by conditions beyond their control. All we have to do is listen — just listen. If those people know that they are not isolated and shut out, they may come up with an alternative, another way to manage and survive. But if they feel isolated and shunned by their neighbors, friends, or even extended family, then the chances of severe depression and suicide are high, as are the chances of alcoholism, incest, and familial abuse.

4. A final characteristic of the farmer that blocks coping is his silence and stoicism. Being strong and silent works well for plowing a 40-acre field, but it works against the farmer when he is in trouble or

trying to make a decision. He does not talk with his peers or spouse enough. Farmers are in a high stress occupation and they are not supposed to show any stress. If they do, it will be read as weakness or poor management. Why do men do this to each other? They must share their worries, their pain, their mistakes, their indecisions, their problems without being viewed as weak. It takes a strong man who can admit he is scared, that he has to cut back, that he cannot keep up with his neighbor, and that he is hurting. I am seeing these strong men now in Minnesota. They are starting to talk — in church groups, in coffee groups, at bowling, on the golf course. These men are beginning to learn that you can go through a lot if your family is healthy and strong and behind you and if your spouse and you can act as a team during these troubled times. Human relationships must be valued by farmers as much as productivity and material assets.

### **USDA Policy Recommendations**

What can the USDA do to help the situation of rural families? I have three policy recommendations. First, we must continue to feed the children and the poor. This helps the farm family directly and indirectly. The surplus of the farm family can be utilized by those in need. If the children of the nation are not sustained in this country, everything else we do is worthless. I know that is a strong statement, but it cannot be denied. If we do not invest in the next generation, then what the hell are we doing? If we cannot provide good nutrition for the young and for the pregnant women of this nation, we are jeopardizing the future of the country. And if we cannot provide good nutrition for the elderly and the helpless, then we are an inhumane society. I feel that these policies must be given high priority by the caring segments of our society.

The second policy recommendation for USDA concern includes farm as well as urban women. An alarming number of children are being raised by single parents in female-headed households, and because women are discriminated against in the work world, the children are being condemned to all the effects of poverty. We need to do all we can to break this “feminization of poverty.” Women as earners need the expertise and information of USDA research and dissemination as much as men. Heretofore, USDA has too often thought of the farm family as the wife at home and the husband as farmer and provider. Reality does not reflect this outdated bias.

The last policy recommendation I want to focus on has to do with USDA research and education. I think we should call it “reeducation” because the extension service needs to reeducate its public now. There has been so much change recently in the knowledge and help that is requested of extension agents that we are no longer in the same ball game. Not only do we have to change the minds of our public, but we have to change our own attitudes about what we are doing. Let me explain further.



Because of a long-standing relationship, the extension agent is around and aware when there is trouble in the farm family. All agents, therefore, need to learn something about family stress management and crisis management. They need to know where the community resources are; and if a person is in moderate to deep trouble, they need to know where the person can go for help. They need to have someone help them to be able to listen to people in trouble. Learning to be a good listener to someone in trouble does not take a degree in psychiatry. The people I see are not psychotic or crazy; they are just highly stressed and, considering the situations they are in, that is a normal response. What I am talking about is families reacting normally to a crazy economy. That is very different from being crazy. It also means that you and I can help. Our reaching out to a farm family in trouble is needed more than medication or hospitalization.

For more than a century the federal government has spent billions of dollars to develop skills in and technology for American farmers and our competitors abroad. This has lowered the costs of production while increasing the size of the harvests. The agricultural extension network in the United States, working through the USDA, is one of the most efficient and effective networks for the rapid dissemination of research and new knowledge. As a result of our super-successful system, the American farm husband and farm wife, as a team, have become the best agriculturists in the world. Together they have produced tender meat, seeds that endure anything, sturdy grains that grow in any soil, the finest cotton, and, in the words of Minnesota's Garrison Keillor, children who are above average.

When I started out as a George Barden home economics teacher, my primary curriculum included how to cook, how to starch, and how to iron a white shirt in twelve minutes. Thirty years later, I am still in the field of home economics. But what I do today has changed: I now research and teach people about preventing suicides, alcoholism, family violence, and child abuse, and how to make decisions and manage conflict. I am still the same person, but what has changed are the professional issues that are considered important. Change is inevitable, not only for our public but for us as well.

The home economics extension service used to supply booklets on cooking, sewing, and preserving food. We now have videos, packets, and booklets on family stress theory, coping, and adaptation. We have booklets on family relocation and decision making. We also have videos and materials on communication between husbands and wives because, if the farm husband and wife cannot communicate with each other, then the farm will not make it, no matter what the technological advancement on that farm may be or how much effort is put into breeding genetically superior plants and animals.

The USDA must pay as much attention in their policy making to the human elements on the farm as to the animal and plant elements.

In the past, the farm family has been given much less attention than their animals, their plants, their machines, and their soil. We can no longer afford this neglect of the human element in rural America.

#### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Boss, P. *Denial*. Agricultural Extension Service Publication #HE-FS-2470. Part 2 of 3-part module (Fall, 1984).\*

Boss, P. *Ambiguity: A Factor in Family Stress Management*. Agricultural Extension Service Publication #HE-FS-2469. Part 1 of 3-part module (Summer, 1984).\*

Boss, P. "Family Stress: Perception and Context." *Handbook on Marriage and the Family*, eds. M. Sussman & S. Steinmetz, Plenum Publishing Corp., 1986.

Boss, P. *Family Stress* (videotape). Agricultural Extension Service, University of Minnesota.\*

Markoff, R. *It's Your Move*. Agricultural Extension Service Publications (number not yet assigned), University of Minnesota.\*

Markoff, R. *It's Your Decision*. Agricultural Extension Service Publications (number not yet assigned), University of Minnesota.\*

Pitzer, P. *Family Stress* (videotape). Agricultural Extension Service, University of Minnesota.\*

\*Available from Communication Resources, Agricultural Extension Service, 433 McNeal Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN, 55108 (612-376-2607 or 373-0710).

# WORKSHOPS

RURAL COMMUNITIES IN AN  
INDUSTRIALIZED AGRICULTURE

FARM FAMILY DISPLACEMENT

REVITALIZING FAMILY FARM  
AGRICULTURE

