

The Family Role in Decision Making

**The wife's influence on decisions regarding
farm business and the family
may provide important clues to management education**

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DECISIONS made by farm families are of the greatest concern to Extension workers. In order to assist families in improving their decision-making ability, it is important that the agent understand who makes decisions, who is likely to influence decisions, and what effect the method of arriving at decisions has on changes made on the farm and in the home. The purpose of this article is to synthesize research findings that have a bearing on the farm family's role in decision making. Primary emphasis will be on the role of the husband and wife in arriving at decisions which involve outlays of farm and family financial resources.

If the family, and especially the wife, influences decisions regarding the farm business, as well as family considerations, a better understanding of the nature of this influence should improve the Extension worker's approach to teaching management and to helping families reach the most advantageous decisions.

American farm families usually handle family business in a democratic manner; however, patterns of decision making vary with income levels, degree of farm specialization, and the extent to which farm and family decisions are viewed as having consequences for the farm and home. It also appears that family values have considerable influence on decisions and actions of farm people. For example, the higher the value placed upon social and educational aspirations and home conveniences, the higher the adoption of improved prac-

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tices has been, while the higher the desire for security, the lower the rate of improved practice adoption.

Teaching Management

Assisting the family to improve its ability to make decisions that achieve family goals is one of the main aspects of management education. Workers using the Farm and Home Development approach have attempted to encourage joint discussion of and agreement on goals of the farm and family. These goals are to some extent dependent on each other and can compete if there is not sufficient capital to attain both. The approach to decisions regarding these goals is often rationalized on the basis that making the investment in technological changes on the farm will lead to increased income which in turn will provide a desirable living for the family. However, family members are not always rational in making decisions and may not be willing to delay accomplishing all major family goals indefinitely. Also, there is not always agreement as to the order in which goals should be attained.

The process of decision making is complex and is related to many situational factors. For example, it has been suggested that the individual's perception and reaction to changes are partly influenced by his values and attitudes.¹ Most decisions involve a certain measure of risk and uncertainty. The individual's idea of the amount of satisfaction he will derive from a certain course of action will be one factor influencing his choices. Since the course of action taken by the family may determine the satisfactions received by all members, it might be appropriate to ask if agreement between husband and wife on the use of resources is important in *all* decisions involving changes or in only those involving major outlays of resources.

FAMILY VALUES AS A BASIS FOR DECISIONS

"Values provide a basis for decisions and actions of people," Wilkening states.² Values play an integrative role in directing family behavior in attaining the greatest satisfactions. To know whether or not certain values of the members of the farm family have a positive or negative effect upon the adoption of changes in the farm and home

¹ Joseph Gartner, Lee Kolmer, and Ethel Jones, *Consumer Decision-Making, II* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1960), pp. 9-11.

² Eugene A. Wilkening, *Adoption of Improved Farm Practices as Related to Family Factors*, Wisconsin Research Bulletin 183 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1953), p. 34.

would provide a basis for understanding the motivation of family members to adopt recommended changes. Research is limited but there is strong evidence that values placed upon education are significantly related to the adoption of changes in farm technology. The level of living is strongly related to farm practice adoption. The ranking of values placed on having modern home conveniences as a family goal was associated with the adoption of farm practices. When asked to choose between farm or home equipment, a majority of Wisconsin husbands and wives chose the farm equipment. Both husbands and wives indicated the need to put farm improvement first in order to obtain the home item later.

The desire for social status by the farm operator was related to adoption of farm changes in at least 18 studies.³ The desire for security, as measured by the value placed upon owning a debt-free farm, was negatively associated with the adoption of improved farm practices among Wisconsin families.⁴ Indications are that, because of risks involved, the negative influence is greater upon practices considered innovations than those regarded as improvements to existing practices.

PATTERNS OF DECISION MAKING

Family living expenditures are less flexible than expenditures for farm operation, investments, and savings; therefore, an understanding of the family living pattern may be essential to an understanding of the economic operation of the farm. From a study of family returns of annual expenditures and incomes in 1946, Longmore and Taylor⁵ concluded that family living expenditures take precedence over those of the farm in low and medium income families. If, under such circumstances, farm practices are to be changed and farm investments made in an effort to support an increased level of living for the family, it may be necessary for the wife to understand that farm goals must receive important consideration.

The attitude of farm husbands and wives appears to be favorable to sharing in decision making. In a Pennsylvania study⁶ husbands

³ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), p. 174.

⁴ Wilkening, Research Bulletin 183, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

⁵ Wilson Longmore and Carl C. Taylor, "Elasticities of Expenditures for Family Living, Farm Production and Savings in the U. S., 1946," *Journal of Farm Economics*, XXXIII (February, 1957), 1-19.

⁶ Ruth R. Honey, Virginia Brittan, and Alida D. Hotchkiss, *Decision-Making in the Use of Family Financial Resources*, Pennsylvania Research Bulletin 643 (University Park: Pennsylvania State College, 1959), pp. 9-11.

and wives expressed the unanimous opinion that it is a good practice to make decisions together regarding family and business. However, about two-thirds of them also said that it was a good practice for each to make some financial decisions independently. Husbands and wives indicated that, in their actual situation, each customarily made independent decisions about certain expenditures. However, it appears that while approving the practice of joint decision making in general these families may have been making certain reservations to their first opinion. Of 250 families involved, 225 said that the major way in which financial matters were settled was to talk over problems, then decide and make plans together. The researchers felt that some division of labor in respect to decision making in areas not involving major outlays of resources might be an advantage to the family.

Joint participation in decision making appears to have some relationship to gross farm income and level of living. From a study of young farm and home development couples in Wisconsin, Wilkening⁷ concluded that as level of income increased, there was greater tendency for level of living to be associated with individual rather than joint decision making. As gross farm income increased, indebtedness had less effect upon the extent to which husband and wife shared in decision making.

Supportive Role As the farm operation becomes more specialized and gross income is high there is a tendency for the wife to be less involved in farm decisions. In addition to the influence that competition for resources may have on the wife's participation in low and medium income or debt-ridden families, it may also be that the wife in high economic status family feels less capable of sharing the responsibility of specialized farm management decisions.

For example, in a Washington study⁸ it was found that wives of more technically competent farmers (the more successful ones) tended to be more supportive. If the supportive role of the wife is positively related to the husband's success as a farmer, it might be that the wife's attitude encourages decisions which lead to achieving technical competence through a high rate of adopting improved practices. The supportive role of husband and wife may be as desirable in achieving farm and family goals as that of equal involvement in decision making.

Studies of families participating in Farm and Home Development

⁷ Eugene A. Wilkening, "Joint Decision-Making in Farm Families as a Function of Status and Role," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (April, 1958), 187-92.

⁸ Murray A. Straus, "Family Role Differentiation and Technological Change in Farming," *Rural Sociology*, XXV (June, 1960), pp. 219-28.

a Wisconsin⁹ and Washington¹⁰ also revealed that as the farm income and level of living increased, there was a tendency for the farm wife to become less involved in farm management decisions. Although the level of discussion regarding home management decisions remained substantially the same, both the participating and non-participating families tended to shift more responsibility for actual decisions to the wife after a five-year period. Even though the majority of families reported discussion matters before decisions were made, the percentage reporting farm management decisions being the responsibility of the operator increased notably among participating families.

Type of Decision

In the Wisconsin Farm and Home Development study¹¹ there was a trend with participating families toward a pattern of decision making that appeared to be a function of the type of decision to be made. Decisions involving major changes—such as whether to buy or rent more farm land, to borrow money for the farm, or to buy major farm equipment—were made by the husband and wife together in the majority of families, or by the husband after discussion with the wife in about one-third of the families. Decisions of a more minor nature, such as the purchase of specific machinery, sale of livestock, amount of fertilizer to buy, or trial of a new crop variety, were more likely to be made by the husband without discussion with the wife. A similar pattern appeared in the Washington¹² study of Farm and Home Development participating and non-participating families. Husbands and wives in a sample of Ontario families¹³ also tended to be jointly involved in major decisions of the farm and in the majority of home management decisions.

Among families studied in both Wisconsin and Washington, decisions in certain areas of home management were more likely to be made jointly. The decision to purchase household equipment or to rent, make household repairs, how much to contribute to church,

⁹Eugene A. Wilkening and Donald E. Johnson, *Five Years of Farm and Home Development in Wisconsin*, Wisconsin Research Bulletin 225 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, June, 1961), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰W. L. Slocum and Owen L. Brough, Jr., *Family and Farm Changes Associated with Farm and Home Planning in Washington*, Washington Research Bulletin 633 Pullman: Washington State University, 1962), pp. 33-36.

¹¹Nancy Ahrens and E. A. Wilkening, unpublished study of wife's involvement in farm decisions as related to farm practice adoption, Dept. of Rural Sociology, University of Wisconsin.

¹²Slocum and Brough, *loc. cit.*

¹³Helen C. Abell, "Decision Making on the Farm," *The Economic Annalist*, 1961 (February, 1961), pp. 1-4.

or whether or not for the wife to take a job in town were made jointly in the majority of Wisconsin families. But whether to paint or paper in the home was likely to be made by the wife after discussion with the husband. The decision on how much to spend for food was made about as often by the wife alone.

When asked their reason for sharing in farm management decisions, wives in the Wisconsin study indicated most often it was to show an interest and because it was the pattern. Others gave reasons indicating the wife's money management role, an interest in farming, involvement in farm work, a share in ownership, a desire for greater returns from the farm, and a share in management.

With some variation, there is a strong tendency for more joint decision making in medium and low income than in high income farm families. One explanation is that as income reaches a point where it is adequate to meet both farm and family needs the involvement of the wife in farm decisions and the husband in home management decisions becomes less crucial. Since the wife is more likely to participate in farm work in the medium and low income families, she is more directly involved in farm decisions.

Home management decisions were more likely to be made jointly by husbands and wives at all economic levels than were farm management decisions; still there was a tendency for individual decisions to be made more often in families of high income and high level of living than in families of medium and low levels. But, as the Wisconsin studies indicate, this may depend upon types of home management decisions being considered.

ADOPTION OF IMPROVED FARM PRACTICES

In teaching principles of management, Extension agents may need to concern themselves with the effect the family pattern of decision making has on the adoption of new farm practices. To provide some insight to this question, the husband and wife of farm families participating in the Wisconsin Farm and Home Development study were asked: "Suppose you or your husband received \$500 from an inheritance or some other source and you had the farm paid for. Would you put most of it into the farm, into the household, or into something for the family?" Agreement on spending most of the \$500 on farm needs was significantly related in a positive direction with three of the four measures of low economic farm status. Joint decision making was more likely to have a positive relationship to adoption of improved farm practices among the low income status families than among the high income group when there was agreement be-

between husband and wife of low economic status families on the use of the \$500 for the farm. In high income status families, agreement between husband and wife on the use of the \$500 for the farm had no relation to the adoption of farm practices, except in families where the husband was a full-time operator. In this case, the adoption of practices was negatively related to consensus.

Even though not treated specifically in this article, some studies have identified influences that young people in the family have on decisions. For example, the relationship of 4-H or vocational agricultural projects on the adoption of farm practices has had some attention.¹⁴ Also, the influence of father-son partnerships on adoption of practices has been studied.¹⁵

Summary Studies to date show that farm families of low and medium income are more likely to make decisions jointly than are families of high income and those who live on highly specialized farms. However, discussion between husband and wife has remained at a high level in all families studied. Even in the families with high incomes, major decisions were usually made jointly. Some studies show wife and husband in supportive roles even in decisions made separately.

Home management decisions are more likely to be made jointly at all economic levels than are farm decisions, according to presently available studies. However, joint decisions regarding home management may apply only to decisions that involve major outlays of resources—other types of family decisions have not been studied. There is a tendency for families with high income and high degree of farm specialization to show more division of labor in home management decisions than do families of lower income levels.

IMPLICATIONS

Since families tend to share in decisions regarding allocation of their resources, Extension personnel might consider orienting their approach to teaching management, whether farm or home, to the family.

It appears that family values have a particular influence on decisions. Providing the family with guidance in more clearly identifying farm and family goals might furnish a framework through which technological changes on the farm and in the home could be more readily and effectively introduced.

¹⁴Wilkening, Research Bulletin 183, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁵James H. Copp, *Personal and Social Factors Associated with the Adoption of Recommended Farm Practices Among Cattlemen*, Kansas Technical Bulletin 83 (Manhattan: Kansas State College, 1956).

Findings indicating more joint decision making in low and medium level income families may not mean that such a procedure is as much choice as it is necessity. Regardless, such knowledge should be helpful in structuring the agent's approach to such families. However, the possibility of family involvement in decision-making procedures as the basis for effecting change in higher income families should not be overlooked.

The important contribution agents might make to the family in equipping them to be more effective managers might be to help them sharpen their ability to identify and bring to focus factors that could lead to the most advantageous decisions—whether for major or minor decisions and whether they are made on a joint or independent basis. Joint discussions among the two agents with the husband and wife might be an important step.

This summary of research has dealt largely with the involvement of farm husbands and wives in decisions that require choices for outlays of financial resources, often major outlays. Some thought should be given as to whether the same pattern of decision making would apply to what might be considered *major* family decisions that do not involve substantial outlays of financial resources—or that do not involve financial resources at all.