

Studying the Low-Income Family

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How do low-income farm families perceive poverty and do they relate themselves to it? Are they satisfied with their present condition? Are they willing to change? In an attempt to answer these questions and gain knowledge about the economic, social, and psychological factors that facilitate or hinder change, a study was made of families in a low-farm-income area of Wisconsin. Findings are discussed and suggestions made for Extension personnel working with low-income families.

PEOPLE living in the United States have, on the whole, achieved a standard of living never before obtained by any other people. However, due to a variety of economic, social, and educational factors, the affluency of America has not been equally distributed among all segments of the population. The rural farm population is one such segment. U.S. Bureau of the Census data indicate that about 15 per cent of the American impoverished families live on farms, yet the farm population comprises only 7 per cent of the total U.S. population. While 20 per cent of all U.S. families fall below the \$3000 annual income level, about 45 per cent of farm families do so.¹

Many private and governmental organizations and agencies (such as the Cooperative Extension Service, Soil Conservation Service, and farm organizations) were established to help rural people raise their standard of living. While these organizations and agencies have helped a significant proportion of the farm population improve both agricultural production and living conditions, many farm families have been relatively less materially influenced. These families remain as potential clientele groups and must be "reached"

¹ U.S., Congress, House, *Examination of the War on Poverty Program*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on the War on Poverty Program of the Committee on Education and Labor, 88th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964).

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if they are to be integrated into the mainstream of contemporary society.

However, before any agency can effectively reach low-income farm families, a considerable body of knowledge regarding the economic, social, and psychological factors that facilitate or hinder the process of change must become available. The study reported in this paper was an attempt in this direction. Its major purpose was to determine differences between low- and high-socioeconomic rural families in respect to certain social and sociopsychological factors. The concern in this report will be with:

1. Rural people's perception of poverty and how they relate themselves to it.
2. Their level of satisfaction with their present conditions.
3. Their readiness to change.

PROCEDURES

Persons selected for this study were all farm operators in the townships of Rose and Richford in Waushara County, Wisconsin. Waushara County is located in the central sand area of the state and is considered a low-farm-income area.

Names and addresses of all farm operators were obtained from the Waushara County Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service Office. Interviews were completed with 95 of the 99 potential respondents.

Years of formal education of the farm operator and possession of certain household items were used as the basis for differentiating high- and low-socioeconomic groups. The Sewell "Short Form of the Farm Family Socio-economic Status Scale"² was slightly modified and used in this study. It was felt that income alone would not serve as an adequate criterion for socioeconomic status, especially in rural areas.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the socioeconomic scale used in this study, 45 of the 95 respondents were classified as low-socioeconomic families. They were characterized by having smaller farms and less farm and family income, less familiarity with agricultural agencies, little contact with the Extension Service, and low participation in community organizations.

²William H. Sewell, "A Short Form of the Farm Family Socio-economic Status Scale," *Rural Sociology*, VIII (June, 1943).

Perception of Poverty

Poverty as a concept has been defined in many different ways, with varying degrees of emphasis being placed on its various dimensions, i.e., the economic dimension, the personal motivational dimension, the social dimension. In an attempt to determine rural people's perception of the concept, respondents in this study were asked to define poverty. The many and varied definitions given were classified into two categories. One category of responses seemed to emphasize the more tangible and economic dimension of poverty, such as lack of skills and employment, low income, and low housing. The second category emphasized the motivational dimension in defining poverty as a "state of mind" and "lack of ambition." Over three-fourths of all respondents defined poverty in terms of economic deprivation.

It is interesting to note that there was no difference between the high- and low-socioeconomic groups in the way they defined poverty. It had been hypothesized that the "lows" would tend to emphasize the economic dimension while the "highs" would emphasize the motivational dimension. Data obtained in this study refuted this hypothesis.

Level of Satisfaction

All respondents were asked to express their degree of satisfaction with 26 selected items concerning three general areas: home, farm and family, and community. Data in Table 1 point out levels of satisfaction in these three areas as expressed by high- and low-socioeconomic families.

On the whole, low-socioeconomic families were less satisfied with their homes. This is reflected in their lower satisfaction with every item making up this category, such as the condition and appearance of the house, household appliances, and furniture.

There was no significant difference in the overall satisfaction level of highs and lows in the general area of farm and family, even though differences in specific items could be observed. It is interesting to note that low-socioeconomic families expressed less dissatisfaction with income, savings, and hours of work.

In regard to the community, the high-socioeconomic families expressed a higher degree of satisfaction with the neighborliness of farmers within the community and with medical facilities available. However, they were more dissatisfied with job opportunities available for them and their children. Low-socioeconomic families were more dissatisfied with recreation facilities.

Table 1. Level of satisfaction of high- and low-socioeconomic rural families in two Wisconsin townships.

Item	Socioeconomic status	
	Low	High
Home satisfaction	2.01*	2.26
Bathroom facilities	2.16	2.56
Sewage disposal system	2.16	2.37
Household appliances	2.10	2.31
Heating system	2.10	2.24
Appearance of the house	1.87	2.22
Condition of the house	1.77	2.08
Farm and family satisfaction	2.06	2.04
Diet (food)	2.90	2.79
Automobile	2.45	2.59
Type of farm operation	2.12	2.42
Education of children	2.55	2.41
Clothing	2.43	2.37
Size of farm operation	2.12	2.21
Farm production	1.95	2.08
Possibilities for farm enterprise expansion	1.92	1.81
Personal education	1.47	1.65
Hours of work	1.96	1.63
Income	1.50	1.35
Saving	1.33	1.16
Community satisfaction	2.11	2.10
The neighborhood and neighborliness of farmers within it	2.65	2.77
Community in general as a place to live	2.65	2.65
Medical facilities available in area	2.20	2.49
Old age prospects in area	2.11	2.10
Family recreation facilities in area	1.74	1.83
Nonfarm job opportunities in area	1.50	1.33
Children's job opportunities in area	1.47	1.22

* All scores are weighted mean scores which express the average satisfaction level which was computed from the scale: completely satisfied = 3; somewhat satisfied = 2; somewhat dissatisfied = 1; completely dissatisfied = 0.

Innovation Proneness

In order to determine respondents' readiness to accept new ideas and techniques, they were asked a series of questions designed to reveal their proneness to innovations.³

³ Questions were patterned after Straus' Rural Attitude Profile. See Murray A. Straus, *A Technique for Measuring Values in Rural Life*, Technical Bulletin 29 (Pullman: Washington Agricultural Experiment Station, August, 1959).

It has been commonly assumed that low-socioeconomic people are less concerned with innovations than are high-socioeconomic people. While findings of this study do not reject this assumption, they do point out, however, that "low" innovation proneness is characteristic of only about half of the low-socioeconomic farmers, in contrast to one-third of the high-socioeconomic farmers. The other half of the low-socioeconomic group indicated a readiness to accept new ideas. However, when the willingness of these people (the high-innovation-prone low-socioeconomic farmers) to accept new ideas was compared with their actual adoption of recommended farm practices, it was found that only 50 per cent were medium or high adopters. The remaining half were low adopters, even though they expressed a readiness to accept new ideas. This difference between readiness to change and actual change suggests that, at times, factors other than personal motivation may restrict the extent to which individuals can introduce desirable changes into their immediate environment.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Obviously, the findings and implications of this study are most applicable to the townships from which data were collected. However, the nature of the variables dealt with makes it possible to draw certain conclusions that may be generalized to other similar situations:

1. Rural people who live under what are generally considered deprived conditions do not necessarily perceive themselves as being deprived, nor do they perceive other families in the community as being deprived. This suggests that it is perhaps against rural people's values to admit conditions of poverty, or that present criteria used for differentiating high- and low-socioeconomic groups are not applicable to rural areas.

Poverty, to be sure, is a relative concept whose operationalization is largely dependent upon standards and norms set forth by people living in a particular cultural setting. In spite of the so-called urbanization of rural areas, it is possible that the differences between urban and rural cultures are still enough to warrant a need for having different criteria for operationalizing the concept of poverty in rural America.

2. It is generally assumed that low-socioeconomic people are satisfied with their present circumstances and consequently lack the

motivation and initiative to improve their economic and social conditions. Findings of this study point out that, in respect to many home, farm, and community aspects, low-socioeconomic families were either less satisfied, as satisfied as, or more dissatisfied than were high-socioeconomic families. This seems to suggest that even though dissatisfaction is an essential prerequisite for change, it is not sufficient by itself. It must be supplemented by other favorable conditions and stimuli before tangible changes can be expected to occur. The stimuli must be applied from the outside and directed at transforming mere dissatisfactions into overt behavioral actions.

3. About half of the low-socioeconomic farmers expressed readiness to adopt innovations, but only half of these actually adopted the recommended practices for their particular farm enterprises. If we assume that this difference is a genuine one, it can be concluded that it is not possible for some rural impoverished families to introduce significant changes into their lives even though they have the apparent will and desire. Their present economic and educational conditions are such as to make change either impractical or uncomprehensible.

The obvious implication that can be derived from the above discussion is that change agents can play a definite role in the process of trying to help certain rural families break the cycle of poverty. And we believe that Extension personnel are in a position to make significant contributions in this respect. However, it ought to be recognized that certain approaches for reaching low-income families, especially the subsistence farmers⁴ and those who lack the economic means for improvement, ought to be emphasized if fruitful results are to be expected. For example, it ought to be recognized that the traditional means (mainly mass media) of arousing awareness and interest among clientele to cause them to seek further help from professional change agents, are apparently not adequately performing this function with low-income people. It would appear then that the initial contact between change agent and client (rural family) should be initiated by the change agent, with every effort being made to establish a desirable relationship with the family.⁵

⁴For a detailed description of the categories of low-income farmers, see Frederick C. Fliegel, *The Low Income Farmer in a Changing Society*, Bulletin 731 (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, College of Agriculture, Agricultural Experiment Station, March, 1966), pp. 38-39.

⁵For further discussion of the importance of establishing desirable relationships between change agent and client system, see Ronald Lippitt *et al.*, *The Dynamics of Planned Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958), pp. 133-36.

Once this has been accomplished, continued educational supervision on an individual basis is more likely to produce change than is any other method of contact.

Studies show that low-socioeconomic groups are predominately nonparticipants in educational programs offered through group methods and mass media. Furthermore, it is fairly well recognized that low-socioeconomic groups as a whole, and subsistence farmers in particular, place a relatively high degree of emphasis on human relationships, i.e., friendliness, helpfulness, neighborliness, and generosity. These relationships can be developed only through face-to-face personalized interaction. Change agents capable of developing such relationships with subsistence farm families can utilize them not only as ends in themselves, but also as means toward an end, i.e., bringing about desirable changes in the lives of these families. While this process of continued personal contact is undoubtedly slow and expensive, it appears to be the best alternative at the disposal of those who are truly desirous of contributing to the welfare of low-income farm families.

THE JARGON OF "EXTENSIONESE"—How to Use: This new invention consists of three columns of buzzwords numbered zero to nine. Think of any three-digit number and then select the corresponding buzzword from each column and, suddenly, you sound as if you know what you're talking about. For example, take the number 825, and you come up with "on-going program role." It lacks a little meaning, but the ring of the phrasing would keep most people from questioning it. Try a few of your own!

COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2	COLUMN 3
0. evaluate	0. educational	0. competencies
1. coordinate	1. diffusion	1. research
2. upgrade	2. program	2. implications
3. formalize	3. professional	3. planning
4. total	4. leadership	4. subject-matter
5. balanced	5. clientele	5. role
6. finalize	6. diffusion	6. image
7. systematized	7. decision-making	7. focal point
8. on-going	8. innovative	8. flexibility
9. responsive	9. policy	9. programming

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