

Attitudes of North Dakota High School Students Toward the Farm Crisis*

Ronald L. Mullis, Richard Rathge, Ann K. Mullis**

The current crisis in the agricultural economy has generated considerable concern among farm families, rural residents, and policymakers at all levels of government. Dwindling values of farm land due to high interest rates combined with accelerated production costs and low commodity prices have threatened the viability of many farms (Leistriz et al., 1985). It has been reported that nearly one in three farmers in the North Central Region may be experiencing serious cash flow problems and as many as 20 percent are in critical financial straits (Dorow, 1984; Paulsen, 1984).

This situation has intensified the decline in family farms. Between 1969 and 1982, North Dakota lost 9,945 farms (21 percent); nearly 40 percent of this loss occurred during the last four years (U.S. Census, 1984). In addition, the farm crisis has negatively affected other sections of the rural economy including agricultural supply vendors, retail trade, and financial institutions. Consequently, it is not just the North Dakota farmer who experiences the effects of the current agricultural economy.

Families also have been affected by the farm crisis. An important consideration is the carry-over effect, from parent to adolescent, of awareness of the agricultural economy and the potential impact this may have on adolescent career decisions. By the high school years, adolescents are at a stage of development when they are asking questions about their own future, "What will I be when I grow up?" Adolescents are exploring career interests and beginning to make some decisions that may permanently alter their career options.

Previous research has provided some information about factors that influence adolescent career decision making. For example, the occupational aspirations of parents have been found to relate positively to the occupational aspirations of their sons and daughters (Fields, 1981). It has been argued that if parents perceive limited occupational opportunities, then: (1) frustration is transmitted to adolescents resulting in lower occupational aspirations or (2) parents may intentionally avoid training practices which encourage adolescents to aspire to occupations which parents perceive as closed or unavailable (Pederson et al., 1982).

Rice (1987) reported that the greatest downward revision between aspiration and expected achievement is among

sons of farmers. That is, sons of farmers who wish to follow the family occupation are least able today to achieve this aspiration.

Gill (1978) has argued that assessing adolescent attitudes and beliefs is an important step in understanding adolescent needs. Therefore, the present investigation focused on the attitudes of adolescents in North Dakota toward the current agricultural economy and how this may affect their occupational ambitions. Additionally, we examined who most influences adolescents' career choices.

Aside from determining how economic stress may influence adolescent career choice, knowing more about adolescent attitudes toward and awareness of the farm crisis can help parents and educators provide adolescents with more accurate information about the farm economy.

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were 2,154 North Dakota high school students, 918 attending rural schools and 1,236 attending urban schools. High schools located in cities with more than 2,500 inhabitants were designated as urban while the remaining schools were defined as rural. Urban students were equally divided by gender. Of the rural sample, 53 percent were males and 47 percent were females. Students represented approximately equal numbers from each of four grades (9, 10, 11, 12) and ranged in age from 14 to 19. The majority of students were from two-parent homes (85 percent urban, 90 percent rural) which averaged 4.5 persons per urban family and 4.6 persons per rural family. Adolescents attending rural schools reported that their families had resided in their homes an average of 10.3 years while adolescents attending urban high schools reported 8.8 years on the average. Fathers and mothers of urban students held predominantly skilled (42 percent and 37 percent, respectively) or professional (33 percent for both parents) occupations. In contrast, farming (37 percent) was the primary occupation of fathers of rural high school students and their mothers were mostly homemakers (41 percent). Whereas 52 percent of the urban mothers and fathers attended college, 38 percent of the rural mothers and fathers attended college.

Instrument

A Career Decision-Making questionnaire was developed for this study. It consists of five parts including statements about the farm economy, career planning, life experiences, decision making, and personal and family characteristics.

*This research has been supported by the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station.

**Ronald L. Mullis and Ann K. Mullis are Associate Professors of Child Development and Family Science. Richard Rathge is an Associate Professor of Sociology/Anthropology and Agricultural Economics, NDSU.

For purposes of this paper, an attitudinal scale concerning the farm economy was used. Adolescents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement to nine statements on a Likert type scale where "1" indicated strongly agree and "5" indicated strongly disagree. In addition, adolescents were asked to report their occupational ambitions and individuals who most influenced their occupational choices.

Procedures

The Career Decision-Making questionnaire was distributed to 918 rural and 1,236 urban high school students in North Dakota. Participants were selected from 18 randomly selected schools, six urban schools and 12 rural schools. School staff administered the questionnaire to groups of students as determined by the school principal or contact person.

Results

Occupational Ambitions

Adolescents were asked to indicate their preferred vocational choice after graduation. Generally, students from both rural and urban schools cited similar post high school activities. Going to college was the first choice of students from both rural (66 percent) and urban (69 percent) schools, followed by getting a job (17 percent of both rural and urban students).

Adolescents also were asked to report their top choice of an occupation for the future. Among youth at rural schools, 10 percent chose farming, whereas only 3 percent of urban counterparts chose farming. Over 22 percent of adolescents who had fathers who farmed reported that farming was their first choice. Less than 2 percent of the adolescents with non-farming fathers indicated that farming was their first choice. Forty-nine percent of students at rural schools and 61 percent of urban students identified a professional occupation as their first choice. When adolescents were asked what occupation they thought their parents wanted them to go into, 10 percent of the rural students reported farming and 3 percent of urban students reported farming. Fathers, mothers and friends were frequently identified by rural and urban adolescents as individuals who most influenced their choices. Fathers were the most influential for adolescents (39 percent), followed by mothers (22 percent) and friends (8 percent).

Attitudes Regarding Farm Crisis

Variables of rural vs. urban high school, father's occupation, gender, mother's occupation, father's education, mother's education and grade in school were used to examine adolescent attitudes toward the farm crisis. Rural vs. urban high school, father's occupation and gender yielded the greater differences in adolescents' attitudes. Therefore, more detailed results are reported for these variables.

Rural vs. urban high school. Table 1 presents attitudes of adolescents attending rural vs. urban schools toward the farm crisis. Significant differences were found for all but one of the attitudinal questions. Overall, students at rural schools tended to report more extreme attitudes about the farm economy in North Dakota. For example, rural students reported stronger agreement with statements concerning the increase in farm foreclosures today, the need for government price supports for family farms, the difficulty in making

a living as a farmer today, and the increased stress for farm families due to the farm economy than did urban high school students.

Adolescents tended to view the farm crisis as long term regardless of school location. Nearly 90 percent of all adolescents were either uncertain or disagreed that the farm crisis is short-term. In addition, a majority of adolescents (52 percent) seemed to believe newspaper and television reports of the farm crisis.

A higher percentage of rural adolescents (23 percent) than urban adolescents (12 percent) reported that they would like to go into farming. In addition, 14 percent of all adolescents were uncertain about a future occupation in farming.

Father's occupation. In order to get a clearer picture of adolescent attitudes of the farm crisis, adolescents with fathers who farmed were compared with adolescents who had fathers in other occupations (see Table 2). Significant differences were found for all nine statements. Adolescents varied more in their attitudes based on their father's occupation than they did when compared on urban or rural schools. Apparently, adolescents who are members of farm families have been strongly influenced by the farm economy. The magnitude of their attitudes are best exemplified by responses to questions 1 (farm foreclosures), 2 (government price support), 4 (farm crisis impact on farm related business), and 9 (stress on farmers and their families). A majority of adolescents from farm families indicated stronger agreement with these statements than did adolescents from non-farm families.

Gender differences. Another variable that seemed to influence adolescent attitudes about the farm crisis was gender (See Table 3). Seven of nine statements yielded significant differences. Males tended to demonstrate more extreme attitudes than females about the farm crisis. For example, a higher percentage of males (71 percent) than females (57 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that farm foreclosures are more frequent today than at any time since the Depression. More males (23 percent) than females (15 percent) agreed that only farmers who are poor managers are being put out of business. Further, 25 percent of the males compared with 8 percent of the females agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to go into farming, and 17 percent of males compared with 10 percent of females agreed or strongly agreed that the farm crisis is not as bad as newspapers and television make it out to be. Between 75 and 83 percent of both genders agreed that the farm situations has caused a great deal of stress for farm families and that businesses in small communities will be negatively affected by the farm crisis.

Other Comparisons

Adolescents' responses to the farm economy also were examined on the basis of father's and mother's education and grade-level of adolescent. No significant differences were found for these variables.

Discussion

Income loss experienced by families during the depression illustrates the interconnectedness between major economic shifts, family stress, and child and adolescent development. Recent economic changes in rural states have

not been as severe as those of the 1930s for most families. However, rural families in the 1980s have had to face increasing economic uncertainty suggesting a need for research to address expectations adolescent family members have about their potential for future job success. Toward this end, the present study was formulated to investigate the occupational ambitions and attitudes of the current agricultural economy of North Dakota adolescents.

The results of the study support the assumption that adolescents are influenced by the present agricultural economy in that they are uncertain about whether or not the farm economy will recover in the near future. More specifically, the data reveal that adolescents view a farming career as difficult and potentially stressful based largely on their school's location and whether or not their parents farm. Nevertheless, 16 percent of all adolescents, mostly males,

Table 1. Attitudes of adolescents toward the farm crisis by school location.

Attitudes	Rural (N = 918)					Urban (N = 1236)					Total (N = 2154)				
	Strongly Agree		Neither Agree or Disagree			Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree		Neither Agree or Disagree			Strongly Disagree		
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
**1. Farm foreclosures are more frequent today than at anytime since the Depression.....	43	25	26	4	2	35	26	33	4	2	39	25	30	4	2
**2. Government price support for various crops are necessary for survival of the family farm.....	46	26	21	4	3	38	32	22	6	2	41	30	22	5	2
3. Only farmers who are poor managers are being put out of business.....	8	13	19	23	37	7	11	20	26	36	8	11	20	24	37
**4. If farmers continue to be put out of business, other businesses in small communities also will be forced to close.....	57	22	12	5	4	45	29	16	6	4	50	26	14	6	4
*5. There is little hope for making a living as a young farmer starting out today.....	23	24	28	15	10	18	22	29	19	12	20	23	29	17	11
**6. I would like to go into farming.....	12	11	15	11	51	5	7	14	10	64	8	8	14	11	59
**7. The farm crisis is short-term and will be resolved in a year or two.....	2	9	39	25	25	2	11	44	27	16	2	10	42	26	20
**8. The farm crisis is not as bad as newspapers and television make it out to be.....	4	8	26	27	35	4	12	32	28	24	4	10	29	28	29
*9. The farm situation has caused a great deal of stress for farmers and their families.....	64	20	9	3	4	58	23	11	4	4	61	22	9	4	4

Note: Responses reported in percentages of adolescents
 *p < .01
 **p < .001

agreed that they would like to go into farming in the future. Another 14 percent of all adolescents in this study were uncertain about a future occupation in farming. It seems that the uncertain adolescent group would be the most vulnerable to the crisis in North Dakota's agricultural economy. Perhaps uncertain adolescents need more accurate information about the farm economy and encouragement to explore their career options more fully. Rice (1987) has noted that the greatest downward revision between career aspiration and expected achievement is among sons of farmers. If this is the case, then North Dakota may have fewer young people willing to go into agriculture in the future without some assurances from significant persons in their lives (e.g., parents) that the agricultural economy will improve and that agriculture is a worthwhile career choice. Again, uncertain adolescents would seem to need this assurance the most.

The salience of the father in influencing adolescents career choices may be due to his particular role in socialization. Hoffman (1977) has suggested that the father is more critical influence on children's achievement behaviors than is the mother. Nearly 22 percent of adolescents who had fathers who farmed reported that a farming career was their first choice. It seems plausible then that some farmers still view farming as a worthwhile career choice and influence their adolescents, especially sons, accordingly.

Girls more than boys were less willing to go into farming. It may be that girls have a lower level of confidence that a farming career would be a satisfying career option for them. Assuming that parents do differentiate between their daughters and sons, it is plausible that parents, especially parents who are farmers, do not encourage their daughters to go into agriculture as a career. The impact of pessimistic

Table 2. Attitudes of adolescents toward the farm crisis by father's occupation.

Attitudes	Father's Occupation									
	Farming (N = 432)					Non-Farming (N = 1710)				
	Strongly Agree 1	2	Neither Agree or Disagree 3	Strongly Disagree 4	5	Strongly Agree 1	2	Neither Agree or Disagree 3	Strongly Disagree 4	5
***1. Farm foreclosures are more frequent today than at anytime since the Depression.....	56	24	16	3	0	34	26	34	4	2
***2. Government price support for various crops are necessary for survival of the family farm.....	54	25	15	3	3	38	31	23	5	2
***3. Only farmers who are poor managers are being put out of business.....	7	11	13	22	47	8	12	21	26	34
***4. If farmers continue to be put out of business, other businesses in small communities also will be forced to close.....	63	21	7	6	3	47	27	17	5	4
***5. There is little hope for making a living as a young farmer starting out today..	27	23	25	13	12	18	23	30	18	11
***6. I would like to go into farming.....	21	15	18	11	35	5	7	13	10	65
***7. The farm crisis is short-term and will be resolved in a year or two.....	1	9	32	29	28	2	10	44	26	18
***8. The farm crisis is not as bad as newspapers and television make it out to be.....	3	5	15	28	49	4	12	33	28	23
***9. The farm situation has caused a great deal of stress for farmers and their families.....	73	16	4	3	5	58	23	11	4	4

Note responses reported in percentage of adolescents
***p < .0001

parents, particularly fathers, on adolescent girls may be significant in a cultural context that initially sets the stage for lower level career aspirations among girls.

References

Dorow, Norbert. (1984) The farm financial situation. *The Courier of Agricultural Economics*. Fargo: North Dakota Cooperative Extension Service, November.

Fields, A.B. (1981) Some influences upon the occupational aspirations of three white-collar ethnic groups. *Adolescence*, XVI, 63: 664-684.

Gill, N.T. (1978) A comparison of ninth grade students interest over seven years. *High School Journal*, 61, 26-33.

Hoffman, Lois W. (1977) Changes in family roles, socialization, and sex differences. *American Psychologist*, 32: 644-657.

Leistriz, F., Albrecht, D., Leholm, A. & Murdock, S. (1985) **Impact of agricultural development on socioeconomic change in rural areas**. Paper presented at the Conference on Interdependencies of Agriculture and Rural Communities in the 21st Century. Zion, Illinois, February.

Paulsen, Arnold (1984) **Projected results of two more years of farm-financial crises**. Ames: Iowa State University, Department of Economics.

Pederson, G.W., Rollins, B.C., Thomas, D.L. & Heaps, L.K. (1982) Social placement of adolescents: Sex role influences on family decisions regarding the careers of youth. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 44, 3, 647-658.

Rice, F.P. (1987) *The Adolescent*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

U.S. Bureau of Census (1984) *Census of Agriculture, 1982*: Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Table 3. Attitudes of Adolescents Toward the Farm Crisis by Gender.

Attitudes	Gender									
	Males (N = 1105)					Females (N = 1035)				
	Strongly Agree 1	2	Neither Agree or Disagree 3	4	Strongly Disagree 5	Strongly Agree 1	2	Neither Agree or Disagree 3	4	Strongly Disagree 5
***1. Farm foreclosures are more frequent today than at anytime since the Depression.....	46	25	24	3	2	31	26	36	5	2
***2. Government price support for various crops are necessary for survival of the family farm.....	43	28	20	5	4	40	32	23	4	1
***3. Only farmers who are poor managers are being put out of business.....	10	13	20	24	34	5	10	19	26	40
4. If farmers continue to be put out of business, other businesses in small communities will be forced to close.....	52	25	14	5	4	48	27	15	6	4
***5. There is little hope for making a living as a young farmer starting out today..	23	22	26	17	12	16	25	32	18	10
***6. I would like to go into farming.....	13	12	15	10	49	3	5	13	10	69
*7. The farm crisis is short-term and will be resolved in a year or two.....	3	11	38	27	21	2	9	46	25	18
***8. The farm crisis is not as bad as newspapers and television make it out to be.....	6	11	27	27	29	1	9	33	28	29
9. The farm situation has caused a great deal of stress for farmers and their families.....	61	21	10	4	4	61	22	9	3	5

Note: Responses reported in percentages of adolescents
 ***p<.0001
 **p<.001
 *p<.01