



Farm family perceptions of interpersonal similarities and marital satisfaction : a qualitative study from a systems perspective
by Marla Jean North

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Home Economics
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Family systems theory suggests family members influence the perceptions of other family members in the immediate family and across the generations. A qualitative study of farm families investigates how couples and extended family members may influence each other in marital satisfaction and amount of agreement or disagreement between couples. The study also examines how the amount of agreement/disagreement relates to marital happiness. Subjects consist of two-generation working farm/ranch families. Included in all participating families are the mother, father, son and son's wife. A separate questionnaire was mailed to each individual family member in 1985 and again in 1987. Perceptions of agreement between couples were recorded by use of a series of questions. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (1959) was used in part to explore perceived marital happiness of each subject and open-ended questions allowed insight into perceptions of family and farm life. The results supported family influence through the generations and between the couples. A mutual theme of satisfaction or dissatisfaction permeated the majority of family units. A common thread of value or belief appeared to connect family units together. The thread was most times obvious, but sometimes subtle. The amount of agreement/disagreement seemed to be strongly related to marital satisfaction. These findings are valuable to the continued research of the strength of the family system in interpersonal perceptions and family patterns. Farm families offer a convenient source of evaluating two-generation family units.

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AND MARITAL SATISFACTION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY
FROM A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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APPROVAL

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Marla Jean North

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

Family systems theory suggests family members influence the perceptions of other family members in the immediate family and across the generations. A qualitative study of farm families investigates how couples and extended family members may influence each other in marital satisfaction and amount of agreement or disagreement between couples. The study also examines how the amount of agreement/disagreement relates to marital happiness. Subjects consist of two-generation working farm/ranch families. Included in all participating families are the mother, father, son and son's wife. A separate questionnaire was mailed to each individual family member in 1985 and again in 1987. Perceptions of agreement between couples were recorded by use of a series of questions. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (1959) was used in part to explore perceived marital happiness of each subject and open-ended questions allowed insight into perceptions of family and farm life. The results supported family influence through the generations and between the couples. A mutual theme of satisfaction or dissatisfaction permeated the majority of family units. A common thread of value or belief appeared to connect family units together. The thread was most times obvious, but sometimes subtle. The amount of agreement/disagreement seemed to be strongly related to marital satisfaction. These findings are valuable to the continued research of the strength of the family system in interpersonal perceptions and family patterns. Farm families offer a convenient source of evaluating two-generation family units.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Upon entering marriage, a couple can never know what type of joy or pain awaits them (Broderick, 1983). Thus, a family starts the journey into the unknown. This journey consists of experiences shared by two people, each with different perceptions of the experiences encountered. There are too many variables influencing each individual for two persons to have identical perceptions. Every person has his/her own schemata that influences how he/she sees the world (Satir, 1976).

In any situation where two or more people live in close contact, a common thread holds them together. This is especially true in a marriage, or at least we have been taught to believe this is true in marriage (Lazarus, 1985). This paper is concerned with how close in actuality are the partners' perceptions of that bond. Do married couples have similar perceptions of how their lives fit together in the marital institution, and do those perceptions affect each other? Additionally, do their perceptions affect other extended family members? This study focuses on the perceptions of marital happiness and agreement among two generations of married farm couples.

Studying extended families provides a more comprehensive look at the influences family members have on each other.

The families in this study were operating a farm or ranch as a family business. The two generations of couples (mother, father, son and son's wife) facilitated explorations of the influences that couples in one generation may have on the other couple of the extended family.

The questions explored will be identified in the methods section of this study.

Definition of Terms

The terms family unit, happy couple, unhappy couple, happy extended family unit, unhappy extended family unit, similarity of perceptions, and internal similarities are defined below:

Family Unit

The family unit consisted of the first generation married couple (mother and father) who were active on the farm/ranch and the mother and father's son and spouse (the second generation) who also were active on the farm/ranch. The son's spouse is referred to in this study as wife. Hence, the total family unit included mother, father, son, and wife.

Happy Couple

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (1959)

ranges from "very unhappy" to "perfectly happy" on a 1 to 7 point scale. "Very unhappy" is defined as 1, "happy" is 4, and "perfectly happy" is 7. A "happy couple" was one where both members rated themselves as at least "happy" (i.e., at 4 or higher).

Happy Extended Family Unit

When all four members of the family unit rated their marriage as "happy" or better, they were classified as a "happy family unit."

Unhappy Couple

When at least one spouse rated him/herself as less than "happy" the pair was classified as an "unhappy couple."

Unhappy Extended Family Unit

When one member of the family unit or more rated his/her marriage as being less than "happy," the whole family unit was classified as an "unhappy family unit."

Similarity of Perception

Similarity of perception refers to the perceptions between spouses regarding marital happiness and interpersonal similarities.

Interpersonal Similarities

Interpersonal similarities refers to the perceived agreement or disagreement between the married couple on

the identified items from the Locke-Wallace Marital
Adjustment Scale.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review will outline the importance of the family system in developing individual perceptions and learned communication patterns and how these perceptions and patterns influence marital satisfaction. This section will include 1) family influence, 2) communication, expectations, and perceptions, and 3) marital satisfaction.

Family Influence

Without insight into the complex interaction of the family, one cannot know the true influences each member has on the family unit, nor how much the family unit influences each separate member. Minuchin (1984) emphasizes this thought:

Looking into the interior of a family, one can suddenly be caught by scenarios. These may be whimsical, challenging, absurd, or dramatic, but they are all disturbing because they carry the tantalizing feeling that they are complete. It is as if one glanced into a store window, and flashed the universe ...But there are hundreds of other pieces with clear or uneven edges that have to be

fitted together in order to see the pattern....

(Minuchin, 1984; p.7)

Many scholars emphasize the importance of a systemic point of view when evaluating any aspect of a family. That is, all members of the family influence the others in some respect, and the family itself acts as a whole entity. The extended family plays an important role in the development of individual perceptions and patterns of communication (Quinn, 1983; Richardson, 1987; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). How couples perceive their marital happiness and the amount of disagreement within the marriage is often influenced by learned patterns of communication and interactions (Markman, 1984; Nichols, 1984; Steinglass, 1987).

The family is seen by Lederer and Jackson (1968) as an "interacting communications network", in which every member is directly influenced and influences the entire system (p.14). When looking at marital satisfaction and issues within the family, the influence of the extended family is unavoidable (Leff & Vaughn, 1985; Napier & Whitaker, 1978).

According to Napier and Whitaker (1978), the extended family has power over the individual:
"Generally, the larger, more complex systems tend to exert control over the smaller and less complex systems"

(p.50). One of the basic problem areas that a couple confronts in their marriage is the fact that they come from different family backgrounds. Background variables such as cultural understandings or family communication patterns may influence the transmission and/or reception of a message. People learn in early childhood how to interpret learned impressions and values which help give shape to the meaning of messages and the style of communication used (Tharp, 1963). This type of learned communication becomes part of a family of origin's "set of implicit and explicit rules for dealing with people" (Skolnick, 1987, p.289). These rules from their family of origin are inevitable sources of conflict between a couple since each member brings a unique set of rules into the relationship. Thus, in marrying an individual, one also marries his/her family (Tharp, 1963). Tharp found that the closer the match between the husband's family concept of what a wife is or should be and the wife's family concept of what a wife is or should be, the better the chance they will be able to communicate more effectively.

Communications, Expectations and Perceptions

The day-to-day interactions with family members, as described previously, influence perceptions. Communication will naturally play a large role in how

couples perceive each other. In his study of married couples and communication, Gottman (1979) found that the less couples communicated, the lower their marital satisfaction scores. Communication between spouses helps clarify misunderstandings between the couple. The importance of good communication, such as sharing feelings and thoughts, is stressed by many researchers who study marital communications and interactions (Borden & Stone, 1976; Gurman & Rice, 1975; Leff & Vaughn, 1985; Miller, 1976; Sabourin, Laporte & Wright, 1990; Thomas, 1977).

While marriage can be a relationship in which two people develop a special code they use with precise understanding (Scoresby, 1977), some conditions exist which increase the probability that messages will be misunderstood. R.D. Laing suggests that communication between humans at any time may be unclear: "I feel you know what I am supposed to know but you can't tell me what it is because you don't know that I don't know what it is" (Laing, 1970; p.56).

Lederer and Jackson (1968) observed that, after years together, some couples learn that certain behaviors mean certain things. The subsequent expectation is that because one is married, he/she will automatically know what her/his partner is thinking and

feeling; such perceptions can be a source of misunderstanding. Similarly, Lazarus (1985) finds that people frequently claim that their partner should know what they are thinking if they really love them. His advice to them is, "Say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't expect your spouse to read your mind" (p.94).

Couples can run into difficulty when expectations are set but not met. When there is a discrepancy between expectations and subsequently behavior, one experiences dissatisfaction. Consequently, the less the discrepancy, the greater the satisfaction (Bochner, Krueger & Chmielewski, 1982; Laren & Olson, 1989).

As mentioned in the discussion of family influence, people learn ways to perceive the world according to past information. Thus, individuals vary in experiences and ways of viewing the world. Sometimes learned ways of viewing others' behavior and communication inhibits one from seeing any other way to behave; this is called selective perception. Selective perception is strongly influenced by expectations (Hopper & Whitehead, 1979). Such perception can result in the selective distortion of incoming information (Stinnett & Walters, 1977), resulting in misunderstandings. Selective perception can be a product

of our background, and, as a part of our schemata, can contribute to miscommunication.

Communications Skills

Communication is important in relaying expectations. The less a couple communicates, the lower the chances are that they will understand each other's expectations. Actions and words are constantly misinterpreted by husbands and wives. There is an unrealistic expectation for married couples to precisely interpret messages the way they were implied (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Scoresby, 1977). However, Lazarus (1985) states that everyone, from friends to lovers to work associates, benefits in their relationships from understanding one another and from being sensitive about feelings and opinions. "Thus, one might learn to read one another's reactions quite accurately" (p.89) in order to reap these benefits.

The intention of the speaker has to be deciphered by the listener. Unfortunately, however, the listener often guesses wrong about the speaker's intention. An assumption that one's spouse's intentions will be accurate leads to carelessness in working on and maintaining good communication skills (Laren & Olson, 1989; Scoresby, 1977).

Satir (1972) identified related inaccurate assumptions that interfere with clear understanding between spouses as: 1. assuming the other person shares your feelings and attitudes; 2. assuming that one knows the thoughts and feelings of another without ever checking the accuracy of these assumptions; and 3. assuming that one knows another's inner feelings and expectations (p.113). The skills necessary to communicate inner feelings and expectations between married couples are often very complex. For example, couples want to facilitate understanding and closeness, yet maintain their individual identity:

The job is big because intimate communication involves a lot more than transmitting and receiving signals. Its purpose is to make explicit everything that partners expect of each other ...to monitor continually what they experience as bonding or alienating... and to effect the fusion that achieves the we without demolishing the you or the me. (Lederer & Jackson, 1968)

According to Stinnett and Walters (1977), communicating feelings and thoughts increases understanding between couples, which in turn helps strengthen the satisfaction of the relationship. The researchers also found that couples differ in

their perceptions of whether or not they understand each other. That is, while some feel that they understand what their partner is saying, others do not.

Researchers have found that couples who experience marital conflict tend to express themselves less when conflict increases. When the expression of feelings and thoughts decreases, there is more ambiguity and contradiction (Bardill, 1966; Gurman & Rice, 1975; Sabourin, Laporte & Wright, 1990). Problem solving, emotional sharing, and advice seeking all decrease when conflict between the couple increases (Sabourin, Laporte, & Wright, 1990).

Family background can influence sex-role learning, which can lead to stereotyped perceptions, ineffective understanding of each other, and communication difficulties (Stinnett & Walters, 1977). Some researchers believe that men and women speak different languages or have different perspectives (Bernard, 1972; Gilligan, 1982). Additionally, Broverman (1970) found that mental health clinicians perceived the healthy adult male and healthy adult female as having significantly different traits that can influence communication. Richmond-Abbott (1983) outlined gender differences in relation to sex roles and behaviors. Gilligan (1982) used Kohlberg's studies that represent

males and females as having developed different ways of perceiving moral issues. The significance of this information for the present study is that men and women appear to perceive things differently and perhaps, then, to communicate differently. These male-female differences are brought into a marriage as well as other differences the couple may have learned while growing up.

For whatever reasons, when the message sent is not similar to the message received, difficulty in understanding is inevitable. Watzlawick et al. (1967) found that in most marriages and families, 85% of the messages received were not the same messages that were sent. In other words, the intent of the sender was either not relayed accurately enough, or the receiver had some sort of difficulty interpreting the message. Confusion and/or disagreement is often the final result of such faulty communication.

According to the studies cited above, the more frequent and precise the communication is between a couple, the fewer erroneous expectations and assumptions that will occur. This precision reduces incorrect interpretations. Clearly, the more accurate a couple's interpretations, the more satisfaction in the marriage.

Marital Satisfaction

Satisfaction in marriage is influenced by many factors. One of the major elements of satisfaction in marriage is the couple's extent of agreement on common goals (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Laren & Olson, 1989). Stinnett and Walters (1977) found the main element in a happy marriage to be mutual sharing and companionship with the couple sharing goals and activities. Laren and Olson (1989) also found agreement on goals and activities is high in the happy marriage. Lederer and Jackson (1968) concluded that, in order to have a satisfactory marriage, it was not necessarily true that one must "love" his/her spouse. Some subjects reported higher expectations and more disappointment when love was strongly emphasized as the main factor in their relationship.

Stinnett and Walters (1977) defined a successful marriage as one in which basic emotional needs are fulfilled; each other's lives are enriched; there exists a mutual understanding and acceptance; and there is mutual care, respect, and responsibility. Fitzpatrick (1988) defined a companionate marriage as a "marriage [which] emphasizes the values of mutual affection, common interests, and consensus" (p.52). Similarly,

Blood (1969) found that more successful marriages have a high compatibility factor. That is, the couple is in agreement as to their marital roles and expectations of themselves and each other.

While looking at the link between dissatisfaction in married couples and unfulfilled expectations, Bochner, Krueger, and Chmielewski (1982) found that if either partner thinks his/her partner is fulfilling his/her roles, the couple is more satisfied. For example, if the wife thinks her husband thinks she is fulfilling her sexual and affection role, both are more satisfied and express more affection (p.145). The researchers concluded that what a spouse thinks his/her spouse is thinking "is at the very heart of human relationships" (p.146).

Other studies have found that marital satisfaction and a sound understanding of one's partner are positively associated. In addition, the more faulty the understanding, the less conflict resolution is possible (Tiggle et al., 1982; Knudson, Sommers, & Golding, 1980).

In their study of couples in conflict, Knudson, Sommers, and Golding (1980) found couples who engaged in addressing an issue gained access to each other's interpersonal perceptions of that issue. That is, an

understanding of each other's thoughts and feelings was the outcome of discussing an issue. Couples who avoided issues showed a decrease in valid perceptions of each other. Consequently, the less understanding they had of each other, the less conflict resolution they experienced. As stated below, perceived disagreement is an important factor in marital issues:

When couples recognize that disagreement and misunderstanding exists, an opportunity exists for the couple to move not only toward increased levels of agreement but, perhaps more importantly, to an increased degree of metalevel access to one another's construals of reality. (Knudson et al., 1980, p.760)

In the prior study, couples experienced an increase in agreement when the issue was addressed. The couples who avoided issues experienced a decrease in agreement. Again, it appeared to be the perception of agreement that was significant rather than the actual level of agreement the couples experienced. The researchers noted that "...the largest changes were not in agreement per se, but in indices reflecting access to the perception of the other understanding and realization of understanding" (Knudson et al., 1980,

p.761).

In a study of 75 cohabiting and married couples, Tiggle, Peters, Kelley, and Vincent (1982) noted that marital satisfaction and understanding between the couples was positively associated. They found a correlation between being able to predict a partner's behaviors and marital satisfaction.

Murstein and Beck (1972) concluded from their study of married couples that similarity, self acceptance, and role compatibility were positively correlated with marital adjustment. They found that perceived similarities were actually more highly correlated with marital adjustment than were the actual similarities. Gurman and Rice (1975) reviewed numerous other studies which supported at least a portion of this hypothesis, i.e., the more similarity between the couple, the greater the marital adjustment and satisfaction.

Open communication appears to be related to marital satisfaction in both rural and urban families (Coward & Smith, 1981). For example, in exploring marital satisfaction, Zvonkovic, Guss, and Ladd (1988) found that rural couples who adjusted to financial strain and even viewed it as a challenge reported to have open communication and a friendship with their spouse.

The research cited in this section is supportive of marital satisfaction reflecting perceived agreement and similarity between the husband and wife. This includes an understanding of each other and mutual compatibility in both rural and urban settings.

In summarizing the literature reviewed for this study, communication is emphasized as playing a vital part in a marriage. Although there are many variables that influence communications between husband and wife, the variables mentioned in this review of the literature were gender differences, family patterns and interactions webbed through geneology, communication patterns developed within the family systems, cultural differences, individual expectations of what marriage should be like and marital myths, selective perceptions, communication skills, levels of understanding and sensitivity, agreement on goals and needs fulfillment, and amount of conflict.

The literature suggests that sharing expectations and overcoming distortions in communication may be important factors contributing to marital satisfaction. This study explores the influence of a couple's perceived agreement and disagreement on their marital satisfaction. Agreement on goals, behaviors, and perceptions will be futher explored to see how

agreement/disagreement on issues affects marital happiness in two-generation farm families. Since communication processes are more fully observable in a multigeneration family system than in a one-generation family system, the mutual interaction patterns of mothers, fathers, sons, and the sons' wives will be explored.

Questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What attributes describe the happy and the unhappy couples?
2. Are there values or beliefs that all four family members have in common?
3. If one person reports being unhappy in his/her marriage, is that unhappiness somehow reflected in the extended family unit?
4. Did the couples' perceptions of their marital happiness and amount of perceived agreement change over the two-year period? If so, did each spouse change in a similar way?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology selected for this project was qualitative because it allows the researcher to search for details of family and married life and to discover the essence and ambience of perceptions and influences of family members on each other. Qualitative methods of data collection can be used to assess how similarities and differences in spousal perceptions are related to marital happiness without the need of measures or numbers (Berg, 1989; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Exploring the commonalities and the relationship between each family member's responses through a qualitative means allows for an individual assessment of meaning behind questionnaire responses and open-ended comments.

In contemporary American society, it is difficult to locate similar multi-generational family units. Family businesses of more than one generation provide one sampling frame. Marotz-Baden and Colvin (1987) suggest that certain stressors families face are occupationally related. Therefore, it behooves a

researcher to hold occupation constant. This study explores the influence of couple's perceived agreement on their marital satisfaction from a systems perspective using two-generation farm/ranch families.

Subjects

The 1985 Sample

The Montana Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) provided a 10% random sample of farms and ranches that they suspected had two generations farming or ranching together. Letters were then sent to the identified families asking them if they met the criteria of an intact two-generation farm/ranch family, and would they be willing to participate. The letter described the study as researching the difficulties two generations of family members experience while working together on a farm or ranch. Each family member was sent a separate questionnaire that was specifically designed for that member (father, mother, son, or daughter in-law). Some of the questions varied according to family position (father, mother, etc.), in order to accommodate the different roles of each member of the family. Each family member completed his/her own specific questionnaire and was asked not to discuss the questionnaire with their family members until after they had returned the completed

questionnaires.

Two hundred and fifty three people responded after the second follow-up letter. Only 3% of these respondents were unwilling to participate and 178 (70%) were not eligible because they were not lineal kin or they were not part of an intact two-generation farm/ranch family with at least one married son. Sixty-eight families met the criteria of intact couples in a two-generation farm or ranch family. One hundred seventy-five out of a possible 288 people responded. Out of these, there were twenty-five complete family units who finished and returned the questionnaire. The family data set consisted of 102 individual respondents (one family had 2 married sons and daughters-in-law). Due to the low numbers of married daughters still working on the farm or ranch, it was decided to look at sons only.

The 1987 Sample

A second questionnaire was mailed to all respondents of the 1985 study. They were contacted by letter requesting that they participate in a follow-up study. As in the previous study, each family member was sent a separate questionnaire specifically designed for that member, i.e., father, mother, son, daughter-in-law.

Except for the deletion of one measure and the addition of another, the 1985 and 1987 questionnaires were identical.

One hundred and thirty six individuals responded. Out of the 136, there were 15 complete families (two generations of related married adults) in the 1987 sample, which was 10 fewer than in the 1985 sample. All four members of 13 two-generation families completed both the 1985 and 1987 surveys. A family unit consisted of a mother, father, son, and son's wife. These families made up the sample used in the research reported below. One family had two married sons. This gave a total of 54 respondents.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed in 1985 by Ramona Marotz-Baden of Montana State University in conjunction with support of the Agricultural Experiment Station, grant #MONB00266. The questionnaire used to collect the Montana data also contained some measures used in the Western Region-167 Research Project. The questionnaire was pretested with 20 two-generation farm/ranch families. After the first pretest, adjustments were made and the revised questionnaire was sent to another two-generation farm/ranch family. The mailed questionnaire contained 19 pages of questions

that included questions about the farm/ranch operation, stress within the two-generation farm family, transferring the operation, personal satisfaction, recent stressful events, facing problems, personal feelings and thoughts, and demographics about the family. The second survey (1987) followed basically the same format.

Instruments

The questions in this study addressed similarities in perceptions of marital happiness as well as issues which often cause marital conflict. The two-generation rural families were looked at case by case to get a sense of how they perceived their own and their spouse's marital happiness and how their views on specific issues were frequently leading to marital conflict.

To assist in analyzing the four research questions, information was needed to assess the marital happiness of each individual respondent. One item of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (1959) was used to obtain this information. The item consisted of a series of questions which were found to correlate highly with marital adjustment. One specific question measured the respondent's perception of his/her marital happiness. Respondents were asked to check the point on a scale of 1 to 7 which most closely represented their

degree of marital happiness at the time the questionnaire was completed. One was "very unhappy", 4 was "happy" and 7 was "perfectly happy". The digits in between (2,3,5,6) stood for the degree of happiness that fits somewhere between "very unhappy" and "perfectly happy" (see Appendix A).

Because the Locke-Wallace Scale and other instruments used in this study were utilized qualitatively, validity and reliability of the scales were not reported. The scales were not used as measurement instruments, but rather as tools to extract relevant information that was examined case by case to explore how each subject perceives and relates to his/her spouse.

After assessing perceived marital happiness for respondents, other measurements were used to examine respondent attributes such as areas of potential conflict between couples. These areas, herein defined as agreement/disagreement, were ascertained by responses of the couples to eight issues. The issues were finances, recreation, affection, friends, sex, conduct, philosophy, and dealing with in-laws. The participants responded to each of the eight questions on a 6 point Likkert Scale ranging from "always agree" with spouse to "always disagree" (see Appendix B). The answers to the

eight issues were examined for the happy and unhappy couples to get an idea of similar perceptions between the couples.

In addition to these eight issues, six other questions from the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale were used to ascertain the similarity or dissimilarity of a couple's perceptions about their relationship. These questions were:

1. When disagreements arise, who gives in or is it mutual?

Response choices: Husband gives in, wife gives in, or mutual agreement.

2. How much do spouses engage in outside interests together?

Response choices: All interests, some interests, very few or none.

3. Do you and your spouse prefer to be on the go or stay home during leisure time?

Response choices: On the go or stay home.

4. Do you ever wish you had not married?

Response choices: Frequently, occasionally, rarely, never.

5. Would you marry the same person again if you were to do it over?

Response choices: Marry same, marry different, not

marry at all.

6. How often do you confide in your mate?

Response choices: Almost never, rarely, in most things, in everything.

These questions were used as indicative of the similarities between spouses' perceptions.

An open-ended question in the 1985 questionnaire asked the respondents to disclose any stressful events that may have happened in the past 12 months. Answers to this question were used to compare understandings and perceptions between the spouses. In addition, the answers to this question were compared on a case by case basis for all four family members of the 13 family units. Thus, the perceptions were examined in each multi-generation family system. This question also added to the analyses of couples' attributes.

Finally, an open-ended comment section at the end of the questionnaire proved to be an important source of data concerning respondent's views and values of his/her farm family life. Case by case analysis of the respondent's answers helped to reveal common values or beliefs for the extended two-generation family units. All four members (father, mother, son and daughter-in-law) were compared to get an idea of common patterns in the family units.

Procedure

The responses to questions from the questionnaires that were pertinent to this study were extracted from the surveys and listed on a fact sheet (see Appendix C). Results for both the 1985 and the 1987 survey were included on the fact sheet for each individual.

In writing the results of this data, each case was looked at separately. Mother and father were addressed as the older generation and son and his wife were called the younger generation. The results of both generations were looked at together and compared. Similarities or differences in perceptions between the sets of couples and the perceived level of marital happiness were identified.

First, a basis for analyzing family units (father, mother, son, and daughter in-law) was established. Respondents were classified as happy or unhappy in their marriages. If one member claimed to be unhappy, the whole family unit was classified under the unhappy category. This was done to facilitate the analysis of the whole family unit rather than a separate analysis of individual family members.

After families were categorized into happy or unhappy, they were then assessed for level of agreement about relationships in the family units and how

responses in each category were interrelated. For example, it was noted that in many cases, if one member was unhappy in his/her marriage, then the overall rating in the agree/disagree classification leaned heavily into the disagree category for the whole family unit. Also, there were more disagree answers appearing within the unhappy units than in the happily married family units.

A 2x2 chart was developed to help organize this information. The chart categorizes 1. families that were happy and perceived agreement of issues among the two-generation couples, 2. happy families that perceived disagreement, 3. unhappy families that perceived agreement, and 4. unhappy families that perceived disagreement (see Appendix D). The chart shows that the families all fell in one of two categories; the category of happy families that perceived agreement between the couples, and the category of unhappy families that perceived disagreement between the couples.

Next, a two-part color coded graph was designed to represent each extended family unit. The first section was a line-graph that illustrated each family member's answers to their perceived agreement or disagreement with their spouse in the eight specified item areas. Both the 1985 and the 1987 results were graphed. The second section was a bar graph that illustrated each

family member's marital happiness (1 through 7) for both 1985 and 1987 (see Table 2).

These two graphs allowed quick assessment of each family member's answers in relation to the other family members' answers of marital happiness and perceived agreement/disagreement of the specific items for the two years. The open-ended questions, the comment area and the other six questions were examined along with the graphs. Differences, similarities and patterns in the family were visible by using the graphs and the other questions together. The attributes that were descriptive of the happy and unhappy families were noted along with the common values or beliefs the extended family members held. The longitudinal changes in perceptions and influences from other family members were examined and recorded also.

CHAPTER 4.

RESULTS

Each case was examined separately in order to look at systemic family influences on perceptions of family members which helped to determine the family status as happy or unhappy. Six of the thirteen families were classified as unhappy. The data from these families will be summarized first, followed by those data from the happy families.

The Unhappy Families

The first question addressed in the data analysis dealt with attributes descriptive of unhappy families. There were two main attributes in common between the unhappy families: communication and sex. Although not mentioned as much as communication and sex, finances and disagreement (arguments) between the couple also appeared as common attributes of the unhappy families.

Communication was the most obvious attribute common to the unhappy families. Subjects who reported being unhappy stated that they rarely confided in their mate. For example, Mother #14, who frequently wished she had not married, stated in 1985 that if she had to do it over again she would marry a different person and in

1987 she reported that she would not marry at all. In addition, she stated that she rarely confided in her husband. When asked the most important thing that contributed to her life satisfaction, she stated: "Communication between husband and wife." She did not include her husband on a list of the most important things in her life.

Communication in another family revealed that Son #64 confided in his spouse almost never in 1985 and rarely in 1987. In 1985, Son #64 reported, "Spouse laid off, financial problems, argue with spouse" as recent stressors. In commenting on any serious problems in the last two years, Wife #64 stated: "Problems between husband and me when he thought I should work, but then wanted me home, too. No communication." The things that were important to Wife #64 were "love between our immediate family, the trust, farm life." These examples illustrate communication and understanding as frequently mentioned problem areas in the unhappy families.

The unhappily married people frequently disagreed on sex. A 2 is next to the lowest rating possible for the most unhappy marriage. With the exception of four respondents, every subject that rated their marital happiness as a 2 or 3 also stated that they

frequently disagreed about sex in their relationship. Affection was also often rated low for the unhappy couples. For example, Mother #44 perceived her marriage as happy. However, she perceived frequent disagreement in the areas of sex and affection.

Disagreements and arguments were common attributes for the unhappy families. Often, finances played a part in these arguments. Several subjects stated that the stress level from disagreements and arguments caused unhappiness in their marriage. In Family #44, the son stated that "arguing with his spouse" was a stressful event. He rated his marriage as not very happy. His wife claimed that "conflict with spouse" was a stressful event in her life and she rated her marriage the same as her husband.

In another example, Son #51 and his wife were very aware of conflict in their marriage. When asked of any stressful events, Son #51 responded, "conflicts with spouse." Wife #51 also noted on her questionnaire that there were "serious problems" in their marriage. Both rated their marriage as unhappy and stated there was disagreement between them over many issues.

The second question addressed common values or beliefs that all four family members have in common. In the unhappy families, there were no visible values

or beliefs that all four family members had in common. In fact, most of the unhappy family members commented on the differences in their priorities and interests. Two spouses agreed that the family and/or farm life was an important part of and a strong influence on their lives.

The third question looked at the influence one unhappy family member may have on the extended family's perceptions of interpersonal similarities. It was noted that when one spouse scored less than 4 (happy) on the marital happiness scale, the other spouse also either rated him/herself as unhappy in the marriage or expressed an elevated level of disagreement in the marriage. This relationship demonstrates systemic influences in the family. For example, at first glance, family #14 appears not to have similar perceptions. Mother reports being unhappy and father reports being happy. Mother #14 perceived herself as unhappy in 1985 and a little less unhappy in her marriage in 1987. She reported feeling stressed about the farm and having difficulty in communicating with her family in 1985: "The farm is a very stressful place for me." "It is easier for me to talk with a good friend than family."

She frequently wished she had not married. Mother claimed she would "marry a different person" (1985) and

would "not marry at all" (1987) if she had it to do over. Rarely did she confide in her husband and when listing important things in her life, she included children and grandchildren but did not mention her husband. Overall, Mother #14 appeared to be dissatisfied in her marriage.

Father #14 seemed to be somewhat more satisfied and perceived the marriage as happier than his wife did; he claimed both years to confide in his mate in "most things." However, some hints of dissatisfaction with the marriage were expressed by Father #14 also. He stated he would marry the same person over again in 1985, yet in 1987 he said he would marry a different person if he had it to do over. He also changed his answer from never in 1985 to occasionally in 1987 when asked if he sometimes wished that he had never married. Although the level of disagreement increased slightly for Father #14 from 1985 to 1987, his marital happiness level remained the same, suggesting some inconsistency on the father's part. That is, he states he is happy in his marriage, yet he shows indications of dissatisfaction.

This couple's response that they would not marry each other if they had to do it over suggests a basic dissatisfaction with their relationship. Although there

is a dissimilarity in perception between the couple, there still tends to be a common feeling of marital dissatisfaction between husband and wife.

There were greater dissimilarities in perceptions between the other unhappy couples. That is, in relation to marital happiness and perceived agreement between the couples, it was found that the unhappy couples displayed more inconsistencies between themselves in perceiving marital happiness and the amount of agreement than did the happy couples.

Next explored was the similarity in perceptions of the other three members of the family unit on the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale issues when one member reported being unhappy in his/her marriage. It was found that when one member of the extended family claims to be unhappy with his/her marriage, there was either unhappiness or disagreement reported by at least one of the members of the other generation couple.

Family #10 was a typical example. Only one person reported his/her marital happiness as less than happy. Yet, every member of the family had at least one item of perceived disagreement. Family #51 was the only family that deviated from this pattern.

In Family #51, both the son and his wife reported

being unhappy and in disagreement on many issues. However, Father #51 rated his marriage as perfectly happy in both 1985 and 1987 and he and his wife agreed on most issues. Mother #51 also rated her marriage as perfectly happy and in agreement on all issues. The only remark that Father #51 made that resembled a problem was when he claimed that he and his spouse did not completely understand each other. He did say that he confided in her about most things. Mother disagreed and claimed that they understood each other completely and she confided in her husband "in everything always." In family #51, the son and his wife indicated dissatisfaction and mother and father indicated satisfaction and agreement in most areas. However, there was a hint of some misunderstandings between mother and father also.

In another example, all members of Family #64 rated their marriages as happy. However, Father #64 chose not to answer if he was happy or not in 1987. All members, with the exception of Father, perceived themselves as having occasional disagreements. In 1987, Father #64 felt he and his spouse disagreed frequently in the areas of sex, recreation, friends, and in-laws. He stated that he confided in most things with his mate but that they did not understand each other completely. In 1987,

Father #64 did not answer whether he would marry his wife again if he had it to do over. He listed the three most important things that contributed to his life satisfaction as being "able to work, fairly healthy, my own boss." There was no mention of family. Mother #64 agreed that she and her husband had an occasional disagreement over finances. Otherwise, she perceived her marriage as happy and that she and her husband agreed on most issues.

Son #64 expressed frequent disagreement with his wife in the areas of sex, finances, and affection. He rated his marriage as happy, yet stated they did not understand each other completely and had very few similar interests; occasionally he wished he had not married. He "argues with spouse," and stated that the most important things for his life satisfaction are "mowey [money], happiness, enjoying friends." The only area his wife expressed as problematic concerned finances.

In family #64 the males tended to be more dissatisfied than the females. Finances were a dominant issue for all members. Both of these patterns, i.e., males being more dissatisfied and financial concerns, were common among the unhappy families.

The last question looked for common changes of

couples' perceptions of their marital happiness and amount of perceived agreement during the two-year period. Changes that were noted in one respondent were reflected by the spouse in some areas. For example, in Family #8, the son rated his marital happiness higher in 1987 than in 1985. Along with this increase in marital happiness was an increase in perceived agreement between himself and his wife. Conversely, his wife reported that she was less happy in the marriage in 1987 than in 1985, and her perception of agreement between the couple had decreased. However, in 1987 she made some comments that reflected her husband's increased happiness, such as reporting that they had the same goals, they understood each other completely, and they were very compatible. When talking about their marriage, she stated, "I never expect perfection, but we're working at it." She did not mention any of these positive notations in 1985. This couple did not report the same changes, yet they had some similar feelings as to the direction of their relationship.

In 1985 and 1987 it was noted that, similar to the happy families, most of the unhappy families indicated that the less they perceived disagreement between themselves and their spouses, the happier they were. Quite often when a subject reported that his/her marital

happiness was decreasing, there was also a report of increased disagreement between the couple. Likewise, when agreement increased, marital happiness also increased. In the extended family, at least one person would report increased disagreement or increased marital unhappiness if another member reported being unhappy.

The Happy Families

Due to the similarity in the answers of the first and second research questions, (attributes and values of the couple and their family) they were combined for the happy families for evaluation purposes. One interpretation of the similarity is that the attributes appeared to become family values or beliefs. Another interpretation is the opposite; family values or beliefs were represented by the attributes which were descriptive of the happy families. For example, the happy families reported marital happiness and similar perceptions of specific items. All the respondents who reported their marriage was happy (score of 4 or higher) perceived that they and their spouse agreed on all the specified items with the exception of three items. Two couples disagreed about sex and one couple disagreed upon recreation. In evaluating the happy families, sex was an item that most couples always agreed upon. All of the individuals who perceived their marriage as

perfectly happy stated that sex was an item they always agreed on. Yet, out of the seven families who consistently reported agreement and marital satisfaction for all family members, there were three members from different families who mentioned a single item each as one frequently disagreed about for a year. One example was a mother who stated she and her spouse frequently disagreed on recreation issues. The other two were men (one Father, one Son) from different families; they both said they and their spouse disagreed about sex.

For example, Father #39 rated his marriage as a 4 in 1985 and a 5 in 1987. In 1985, he listed only one item as being an issue causing frequent disagreement: sexual relations with his wife. His wife had reported only one "occasionally disagree" answer in 1985, also dealing with sex. Every other item in 1985 and all items in 1987 for both Father and Mother were on the agree side of the scale. Mother rated her marriage a 6 on the marital happiness scale for both years.

The other family who reported a "frequently disagree" on only one item was Family #15. Son #15 rated his marriage a 5 in 1985 and a 4 in 1987. His "frequently disagree" item was sex in 1987. Wife #15 reported no issues of disagreement in either year.

However, she stated that the most serious problem she has experienced has been family disagreement.

The value or attribute that was most commonly reported throughout the happy families was the presence of God in the family life. There was detailed mention of the inclusion of God in the lives of the happy couples. Although there was no specific question regarding religion and God, the question about most important things for life satisfaction and the comment area at the end of the questionnaire frequently contained mention of God.

Examples of these respondents' belief in God were numerous. In talking about what three things were important to him, Father #50 said: "God gave his Son for me, God gave me a good wife, and God has blessed our life." Mother #50 also mentioned God in the things important in her life: "Love for each other, trusting each other, faith in God." Son stated that "Faith in God and Jesus Christ, my wife and children, success as a business man and dairy farmer" were important to him. Wife #50 listed "Faith in God, my family, knowing my own self worth" as important.

All members in one other family listed God as one of the most important things in their lives. In three families, one or more members listed God as important in

their lives. In contrast, only three people in the unhappy families mentioned God and only three people mentioned church as important things in their lives. The happy families' mention of God was detailed and emphasized by most all members of the family, unlike the unhappy families.

More happy family members mentioned God as a common source of inspiration than did unhappy families. God did not appear to be as common a theme in the extended unhappy families or between unhappy couples as in the happy families. God and/or religion seemed to reflect a belief or value of the generations of happy farm families, providing a common value for these families.

Another attribute or value in the happy families was communication and understanding between the couples. Happy family members spoke of communication in a general sense that included understanding and companionship. For example, Mother #18 commented: "My husband is my best friend so he is also the one I depend on for love, friendship and advice." Father #54 stated: "We have never had an argument of any consequence. We always talk things over." Father #27 commented: "Communication is the best answer in working together." Father #50 spoke of working and living together on the farm: "Working

together lets you know each other better." These examples illustrate a lifestyle that influences family bonds and interactions that appear to be common to the farm families who get along well.

Son #33 saw communication and religion as related. He reported the most important things in his life thusly: "I think the most important is we are both Christian families which makes forgiving, forgetting and understanding much more easier." Wife #54 commented that she turns to "husband and God for advice."

Communication and understanding other family members appear to be represented as part of a lifestyle and value system for this small sample of happy farm families. Religion and working the farm together are vehicles that seem to facilitate this type of value system, thereby affecting the extended family's communication and understanding.

The third question dealt with the extended family's perception of their interpersonal similarities when one member reported being unhappy in his/her marriage. This question could not be fully addressed due to the fact that none of the happy family members rated their marriage as unhappy. However, those who rated their

marriage around the happy mark (4 or 5) were compared with those who rated their marriages as somewhat happier (6 or 7). For the most part, all the happy respondents had similar perceptions of their marital happiness and their level of agreement.

The respondents who rated their marital happiness between 4 and 5 tended to have a few more "occasionally disagree" answers and a few more doubts as to whether they would marry again if they had to do it over than the respondents who rated their marital status above 5. When one of these family members rated their marriage as happy yet gave indications of disagreement or dissatisfaction between self and spouse, then at least one other family member indicated disagreement or dissatisfaction with his/her spouse in some area also. In other words, when one family member indicates disagreement or dissatisfaction, at least one other member, although expressing happiness in marriage, would give subtle indications of areas of disagreement or dissatisfaction. For example, Son #18 rated his marriage as a 5 in 1985. He noted disagreement between him and his spouse on three items. When asked if he ever wished he had not married, he stated rarely. His wife rated her marriage as a 6 and reported agreement in all areas. However, she stated that she and her husband did not

understand each other completely.

This pattern was common for the extended family members. The same was noted across the generations. For example, when the parent reported some dissatisfaction, there was also dissatisfaction reported by the son. Unfortunately, these subtle influences on relationships between the extended family members could not be explored further in this study.

The fourth question addressed changes over a two-year period for the couple's perceptions of their marriage and related issues. With the exception of two couples who happened to be in the same family unit, the spouses were well-matched in marital happiness and perception of agreement of specific issues for the two-year period.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to look for interpersonal similarities of marital happiness and perceptions of agreement on specified issues between married couples within two-generation farm family systems. Family values and common issues were looked for that may have influenced perceptions of family members. How these values and issues may affect the individual's and family's perceptions were also explored. Results of this study offer possible answers to the research questions described below.

1. What attributes describe the happy and the unhappy couples?

The attribute that seemed to surface within these families the most frequently was sex. When a family was unhappy, an answer of frequently disagree about sexual relations was common. When couples expressed disagreement they commonly linked affection with sexual relations.

When the extended family was categorized as happy, sexual relations between couples was the item listed the most often as showing the greatest amount of mutual agreement between the couple. The happy couples were

high in agreement upon the sex item as being something they always to almost always agree upon.

Financial issues for some unhappy farm families was an attribute. As mentioned in the literature review, the recent financial crisis for farm and ranch business has caused difficult times. It was noted that the financial issue was normally expressed by the whole family unit as an area of concern for the family farm business. This issue affected every member of the family unit.

Furthermore, disagreements and arguments were mentioned as problem areas for the unhappy families. Often the source of arguments was financial issues.

In the open-ended questions such as, "What are the most important things in your life that add to your life satisfaction?" and in the comment area, God was mentioned frequently for the happy families. God was a very strong influence that seemed to encompass the whole family unit. The unhappy families did not include God as much and when they did, it was in the form of church attendance; usually just one family member would mention it.

Communication was an attribute for both unhappy and happy families. The unhappy families reported poor communication as a source of problems, while happy families reported good communication and mutual

understanding between the spouses.

2. Are there values or beliefs that all four family members have in common?

The unhappy families did not appear to present any values or beliefs that all four family members shared. The happy families shared a religious foundation that appeared to extend into their lifestyles. Communication, understanding, and compassion were a large part of the happy extended family's values. Farm life was included as an important part of the happy family's value system.

3. How do members of the family unit perceive their interpersonal similarities when one member reports being unhappy in his/her marriage?

For unhappy families, it was noted when one member self-reported as unhappy in his/her marriage, there were more items of disagreement for at least one of the other extended family members than in the happy families. This was a consistent pattern.

Basically, the consistency of perceptions about marital happiness and the extent of agreement between couples was fairly strong. The few couples that perceived their marriage on far different levels of happiness (a discrepancy of two or more points) usually had at least one comment or answer indicating this discrepancy. Even when one spouse was unhappy and the

other claimed to be happy, the happy spouse would give some clue about the marital disturbance. Some indicators were direct comments and some were answers that did not fit with the otherwise happy marriage the respondent was describing. Therefore, it appears that perceptions of happiness or unhappiness usually followed a common pattern within the extended family units.

Some respondents appeared to be unaware of or did not admit to marital problems. This non-awareness was indicated when spouses answered questions very differently from each other, i.e., one was happy and the other unhappy. Usually in these cases a respondent would claim to be happy, yet disagreement with the response would be high or comments would be flavored with disappointment or dissatisfaction in the marriage. Sometimes in listing things that are important, the respondent would not include his/her spouse.

4. Did the couples' perceptions of their marital happiness and amount of perceived agreement change in the two-year period? If so, did each spouse change in a similar way?

Questioning the respondents on their perceptions of the same issues two years later proved useful. In almost every case, the changes that one spouse made were reflected by the other spouse also. Some couples changed

together toward happiness, some changed toward feeling more unhappy. Again, when one spouse changed in one direction and the other remained the same or went the opposite direction, there was always at least one answer by the "unchanged" partner that indicated a move in the same direction as his/her partner.

Overall, consistent answers were noted in perceptions of agreement between 1985 and 1987. The respondents changed some of the specific items that they agreed or disagreed upon, yet they always seemed to follow a similar direction according to a category of agree or disagree.

Discussion

As many researchers have noted, the family system is interconnected and no one is exempt from the effects of other family members' actions or attitudes (Broderick, 1983; Minuchin, 1984; Napier & Whitaker, 1978; Nichols, 1984; Sherman & Fredman, 1986; Steinglass, 1987). This study offered a look at the interpersonal similarities in the extended farm family. Their attributes, values, and beliefs were examined to locate patterns or commonalities within the family system over a two-year period. Influences that family members have on each other were also addressed. Marital

happiness and perceived agreement between the couples were used to demonstrate family system influences.

There seemed to be a common connection throughout the responses of most of the extended family members. Often this connection was subtle. The most obvious common connection among family members was God, who represented a common value or belief for the whole family unit. Whether this belief in God influenced the families to maintain similar attitudes, or such similar attitudes set the stage for a philosophy represented by religious beliefs, these happy families displayed that common connection nonetheless.

In evaluating the responses of the couples, it was noted that the couple's perceptions were usually very close to one another. Even when they disagreed, there was some indicator that depicted a common perception between the couple. For example, unhappy couples frequently disagreed about sexual relations between them, but happy couples mostly always agreed on their sexual relations.

There may be a reason for sexual relations as a common issue of agreement or disagreement. As other researchers have noted, emotional bonding (or love) is a complex mix of physical and emotional aspects. "Love is

a blend of many elements--sexual attraction, companionship, care, and affirmation (Blood, 1969, pg.107). Perhaps the happier the couple is, the more emotionally bonded they are, and the more emotionally bonded they are, the more they may express this closeness through sexual relations. As Stinnett and Walters (1977) observed, "A good sexual relationship is more likely to be the result of a good total marriage relationship rather than the cause of it" (p.57).

Family influence was represented throughout the generations, but not every case was clear. That is, there were small hints of dissatisfaction for one member and openly expressed unhappiness for other family members. Marital happiness and the amount of perceived agreement appeared to affect each other in many different ways, subsequently reported in the results section.

Limitations

The questionnaires were designed for quantitative research, as qualitative studies require a somewhat different type of questioning procedure. As Berg (1989) recommends, four types of questions should be used in order to secure the most complete story: essential

questions, extra questions, throw-away questions, and probing questions. The present study was limited in that there were few probing questions in the mailed questionnaire. Thus, the answers were shorter and less complete than that which would be desirable for qualitative research.

This research may be limited to specific family dynamics common to only rural families. Rural families may have other factors that influence their family lifestyle, values, and perceptions other than those previously addressed in this study. Those unknown factors may differ from urban families, thus limiting the application of this study's findings to urban families.

Implications

This study is a stepping stone for research on the two-generation farm family's interpersonal perceptions and family patterns. Marital satisfaction and perceived agreement between a couple is a correlation commonly studied by researchers. The influence that extended family members have on each other is also a common study area in family systems research. Farm families who transfer the farm business to the next generation also allow study of two-generation family patterns and influences.

A follow-up study that would allow a more complete qualitative style of questioning is recommended. Further study of factors unique to rural families that may affect family interactions and perceptions would be beneficial to understanding how rural and urban families may differ in family patterns.

A quantitative study based on the information available in the questionnaires used in this study could be done to support the findings in this study. One such approach would be a correlational study between the amount of perceived agreement/disagreement and marital happiness levels. This data would expand the present study's findings and help to verify its results.

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