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Determinants of Farm Size and Structure

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Johnson/Farm Managerial Inquiry: Past and Present Status and Implications for the Future

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STRONG FAMILIES AND STRONG FARMING ORGANIZATIONS: IS THERE A CONNECTION?*

John DeFrain and Nick Stinnett**

Agricultural economists have been using the tools of their trade for a long time in an effort to help farmers find the most efficient ways to run their operations for maximum financial profit.

Similarly, social and behavioral researchers with backgrounds in family studies (or what is now coming to be called family science), psychology, and sociology, have also invested many years trying to better understand human beings and families so that relationships could be improved.

Unfortunately, there apparently has been little interdisciplinary collaboration between the two research traditions. Child development specialists talk about the "parallel play" of two- and three-year-olds in a sandbox. The toddlers are playing near each other in physical proximity, but little or no genuine interaction occurs. Likewise, agricultural economists and family scientists have engaged in "parallel play" in their universities for years. Though they may work only a five-minute walk away from each other, professors often fail to connect, losing a great opportunity to learn from each other.

In this paper we will spend most of our time talking about research on strong families which we have been working on for nearly 15 years now with more than three dozen colleagues. This research on "successful" or "healthy" or "well-functioning" families is tied to a research tradition that goes back nearly 60 years.

We will end the paper with a few ideas on how agricultural economists and family scientists could collaborate to better understand the intricacies of successful farm operations. And we would hope that agricultural economists would be able to "bounce off" our ideas here and generate proposals of their own for very sophisticated interdisciplinary research.

The Search for Strong Families

The search for the keys to financial success in farming probably goes back in time as long as there have been farms. Likewise, the search for the secrets of strong families no doubt goes back as long as there have been families.

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A Note on Terminology

Different researchers and theoreticians use several different terms when talking about families who are doing well. These include: healthy families, well-functioning families, successful families, balanced families, happy families, strong families, and so forth.

Our research team has decided upon the term "strong families" for a number of reasons. For one thing, the term "strong family" has been used to good advantage for many years in the research literature and thus is recognizable to many professionals. Secondly, the term "strong family" carries a more resilient, realistic connotation than such terms as "happy" or "successful" or "healthy." In studying strong families, it becomes very clear that they do not live "Pollyannish" lives or lives devoid of challenge and grit. The families we have studied live in an all-too-real world, but have proven their ability to cope with this world's ups and downs.

The research literature broadly related to successful families is rather voluminous, and dates to at least 1920 (Keim, 1972).

One of the most influential of the pioneers in family strengths research was Herbert Otto (1962). He began his work by asking families to help him develop a conceptual framework for the study of family strength. On the basis of his interviews, he hypothesized six clusters, based upon how family members fulfilled each others' needs. The clusters became his criteria for assessing family strength:

- (1) shared faith, religious and moral values;
- (2) love, consideration, and understanding;
- (3) common interests, goals, and purpose;
- (4) love and happiness of children;
- (5) working and playing together; and
- (6) shared specific recreational activities.

Following this pioneer study, Otto (1963) took the six clusters above and defined them in more specific terms. Viewed independently, these clusters can be seen as individual components, individual family strengths. Viewed as a whole, the components continue to change and interact with each other, resulting in total family strength. Otto's second set of family strengths is as follows:

- (1) The ability to provide for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the family.
- (2) The ability to be sensitive to the needs of the family members.
- (3) The ability to communicate.
- (4) The ability to provide support, security, and encouragement.
- (5) The ability to establish and maintain growth-producing relationships within and without the family.
- (6) The capacity to create and maintain constructive and responsible community relationships in the neighborhood, school, town, and local and state governments.
- (7) The ability to grow with and through children.

- (8) The ability for self-help and the ability to accept help when appropriate.
- (9) The ability to perform family roles flexibly.
- (10) Mutual respect for the individuality of family members.
- (11) A concern for the family unit, loyalty, and interfamily cooperation.
- (12) The ability to use crises or seemingly injurious experience as a means of growth.

Otto and a colleague set out soon after to bring a measure of conceptual clarity in the professional literature to the problem of identifying successful families (Gabler and Otto, 1964). The researchers reviewed the professional writings on healthy families in the post-World War II period (1947-1962). By 1962, Gabler and Otto found that professionals in psychology, psychiatry, social work, sociology, and family life education were using 515 different terms to describe the characteristics or traits of family strength. Gabler and Otto, fortunately, decided that 515 terms was unmanageable and selected 15 components which to them at the time seemed representative of what the professionals were saying:

- (1) the family as a strength within itself
- (2) strong marriage
- (3) strength as parents
- (4) parents help children to develop
- (5) relationships within the family
- (6) family does things together
- (7) satisfactory social and economic status
- (8) religious beliefs
- (9) home environment
- (10) active in community affairs
- (11) education
- (12) capacity to change
- (13) relationships with in-laws
- (14) attitudes toward sex
- (15) recognizing the need for and accepting help

Brage and Lee (1988) reviewed more recent family strengths research and cited five key theorists: Barnhill (1979); Beavers (1977, 1981, 1984); Epstein et al. (1978); Lewis (1979); and Stinnett et al. (1977, 1979, 1981, 1985). We would add the work of Olson and McCubbin et al. (1983) to this list.

Using Otto's early work as a foundation, Stinnett and three dozen colleagues have perhaps invested as much energy studying strong families as any research group in the country.

Stinnett began his work at Oklahoma State University in the early 1970s, and continued at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Pepperdine University, and now the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa.

More than 3,500 people have participated in the Stinnett group's research in all 50 states and more than 20 foreign countries. More than 30 Master's theses and doctoral dissertations have been written by the group. Data-gathering techniques have included interviews, observations, and questionnaires. In some of the studies, families were recommended by professionals for their

qualities (family life specialists of the Cooperative Extension Service in Oklahoma identified candidates in one early study). More commonly, families volunteer for the research and are screened to see if they possess significant family strengths as delineated by prior research.

The Stinnett group has conducted a great variety of studies:

- communication patterns in strong families;
- religious/ethical values of strong families;
- how strong families cope with crisis;
- dual-career and traditional strong families (about 50% of the strong families have been dual-career families, and about 50% have been more traditionally oriented);
- parent-child relationships in strong families;
- the strengths of single-parent families (a strong single-parent family is most definitely not a contradiction in terms);
- strengths of remarried families;
- leisure patterns;
- the use of humor in strong families (sarcasm and putdowns are not commonly used in strong families, but good, kind humor is very common; strong families love to laugh);
- executive family strengths and stresses (having adequate family time was a big problem with many of the families in this study of a sample of Fortune 500 executive and their spouses);
- strengths and stresses of farm and ranch families;
- strengths and stresses of Air Force families;
- strengths and stresses of Army families; and
- family strengths and personal well-being.

A number of ethnic and cross-cultural family strengths studies have also been conducted:

- strong black families;
- strong Native American families;
- strong Hispanic families;
- strong families in Latin America (12 countries);
- strong families in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria;

- strong families in Iraq;
- strong families in Soweto (the strife-torn black ghetto outside of Johannesburg, South Africa);
- Soviet immigrant family strengths; and
- Chinese family strengths.

The best overall explanation of this research and its usefulness for families is Secrets of Strong Families (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985, 1986).

The University of Nebraska sponsored the National Symposium on Building Family Strengths for ten years (1978-1987). Eight volumes of books of readings on family strengths-related topics were published as a result of the Family Strengths Symposium series (Lingren et al., 1987; Rowe et al., 1984; Stinnett et al., 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982; Van Zandt et al., 1986; Williams et al., 1985).

The big news from the cross-cultural family studies is not how these families differ, but how remarkably similar they are in many essential ways. We hypothesize at this early, exploratory point in our research that strong families in Western industrial societies will tend to share many similarities.

Six Qualities of Strong Families

Our most important contribution over the years has been the development and refinement of a model of family strengths that has six clusters of interacting qualities in it. We believe that every strong family is different and unique, but that strong families tend to demonstrate that they possess a number of common qualities. The six clusters of qualities that we believe make up family strengths are:

- (1) commitment to the family;
- (2) appreciation and affection for each other;
- (3) positive communication patterns (openness, honesty, and a tendency to reinforce the strengths of each family member rather than belabor the weaknesses);
- (4) adequate time together ("quality time, and in great quantities");
- (5) spiritual wellness (optimism, religious/ethical values, mental health, oneness with the world, community bonds); and
- (6) the ability to cope effectively with stress and crisis (Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985, 1986).

Let's go back and look at each cluster of qualities a bit closer:

1. Appreciation and Affection

Families often tend to take each other for granted, but in many strong families the members give and receive appreciation and affection freely and openly. The key is that the members let each other know on a regular basis how good they make each other feel. This cements family bonds and builds self-esteem among family members.

We have not put voice-activated microphones on family members and precisely calculated the percentages, but our guess is that more than 90 or 95 percent of the time the interchanges in these families are positive. Family members do not spend much time sand-papering each other, for this is basically destructive.

2. Commitment to the Family

Strong family members describe their commitment to each other in almost religious terms. And, in fact, some strong families see their commitment to God as a guiding force in life which helps bind them together as a family and helps them to treat each other with great respect and reverence. The strong families we have studied tend to see each other as the number one priority in life, ahead of job, money, success, and so forth.

Strong family members often tell us that they are careful not to smother individuality in their families, but rather to rejoice in the uniqueness of each person. Some quote the poet Kahlil Gibran in this respect:

...stand together yet not too near together: For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow (Gibran, 1923, p. 16).

One of our colleagues, Kathy Simon, studied 700 fathers. She called her project the "Fatherly Advice" study, and she wanted to find out what is the most important thing a father can give his children. She had expected the fathers would focus on the importance of spending time with their youngsters, and giving them positive feedback to enhance their self-esteem. The fathers, however, proved to be even wiser than this.

"When I asked the fathers the most important thing they could give their children, I was quite surprised. The most common response: "A happy marriage" (Simon, 1986).

The fathers' point is well taken. Many times the marriage suffers because parents invest so much time and energy in their work and their children. But if the family is to succeed, intimate communication between fathers and mothers must be maintained. Commitment to the marriage is essential.

3. Positive Communication Patterns

A researcher once conducted an experiment which boggles our mind. He was interested in the amount of time that husbands and wives spend in conversation each week, so he wired portable microphones to his subjects. Every word the couples spoke was recorded on voice-activated taping machines. Being hooked up to these machines may have stifled some conversations; and some couples probably toned down their yelling at the children while being taped. But the researcher was

still amazed at the results: The average couple in his study spent only 17 minutes per week in conversation. Seventeen minutes per week, out of 10,080 minutes in a week (McGinnis, 1979).

Strong family members tell us they spend a good deal of time talking with each other. We have never wired them up, so they may overestimate the amount of conversation they have. But they believe it is far more than 17 minutes per week. For example, our most recent study of 50 Chinese husbands and wives found that the average spouse believed s/he spent slightly more than two hours per day talking with the spouse. This conversation takes place at the dinner table, during walks around the neighborhood, while watching television, in bed together, and so forth (Chen, 1988).

The communication generally is open and honest give-and-take. Most of the time people are responding positively to each other, but there is bickering and disagreement in strong families.

Communication specialists note that there are four ways to resolve a family argument:

- (1) "I win/you lose," or "You win/I lose."
- (2) "I'm leaving." (One person withdraws from the dispute.)
- (3) Compromise. (Split the difference.)
- (4) Standoff. (People agree to disagree.)

We are fond of saying that strong family members have strong individuals--strong mothers, strong fathers, strong children. People have opinions in strong families, and are free to express these opinions, sometimes with vigor. No one is stifled.

As family therapists, we like to point out the utility of compromise in resolving family disagreements. But in strong families, we have the strong impression that standoffs are also quite popular. People have the right to disagree in these families, and that contributes to the health of the family.

Though violence is relatively common in American families, none of the people in our studies of strong families has ever listed verbal or physical aggression as a family strength. Perhaps the best definition of violence we have heard is the one that says that violence is any behavior which elicits fear in another human being. Violence and fear are not part of our model of family strengths.

4. Adequate Time Together

American society engenders a curious belief that career-building takes vast amounts of time, but that family-building can be done on the cheap. When we hear people tell us how busy they are, but immediately start to shift into a spiel on the joys of so-called "quality time," we start to cringe as family specialists: "Here comes a great big rationalization!" On the contrary, our strong families tell us that they spend quality time with each other, but "in great quantities."

To be a success in the business world takes a great deal of time and energy. Why should families be any different? If families are the foundation of society--which we believe they are--then families deserve the time and attention they need to grow.

The good times families spend together tend to be serendipitous good times, spontaneous good times that come up because the family members are around each other a lot. The family

members don't tend to say to each other, "Let's schedule each Wednesday evening from 7 to 9 to have deep philosophical talks." Rather, the deep philosophical talks spring naturally from the relaxed moments they share with each other.

We have asked many adults over the years to describe the best times they can remember with their families of origin back when they were children. They commonly will say things like this:

- "The times when Mom and I would scrub the kitchen floor together and talk and talk and talk."
- "Dad and I would work on cars on Saturdays and talk about all kinds of things."
- "Family reunions when all the adults would sit and talk in the kitchen and living room, and the kids would chase each other all around the house inside and out."
- "Family camp-outs... We had wonderful times up at the lake."
- "Having Mom read stories to us before bed every night."

Rarely do these descriptions of the best family times together involve any activities that are highly sophisticated, complicated, or expensive. The good times families share together flow not from material riches but from the genuine good feelings family members have for each other.

5. Spiritual Wellness

This means religion for many strong family members: faith in God, or faith in goodness in life, or faith in your loved ones and friends. When strong families talk about the qualities that make them healthy, they talk about spiritual resources: hope, optimism, a sense of purpose in life, mental health. Many talk about oneness with nature and humankind.

These transcendent values or connection with a higher power help strong families focus on the most important aspects of life. The constant bombardment by trivial hassles can threaten mental health and positive human relationships, but a commitment to something greater than the day-to-day struggles helps family members feel better about themselves and each other.

Strong families are not isolated, but have many friends in their communities and generally tend to be active in various ways. Some live their values through work in their churches and synagogues. Other ways they demonstrate spiritual well-being is through service organizations and commitment to various causes on a local, national, or international level.

Strong families use many different words to express their spiritual side; and in our studies, we have found strong family members representing an almost infinite number of religious and personal beliefs. The common denominator, if there is one, is that the family members believe there is more to life than just "me," and by connecting to the greater good one's personal life and one's family life are both enhanced.

6. The Ability to Cope Effectively with Stress and Crisis

Strong families are not strangers to crisis. One of our studies of a group of strong families found that 85 percent had experienced a crisis in the past 5 years. Only four percent of the families felt they were unsuccessful in dealing with the crisis (Stinnett, Knorr, DeFrain, and Rowe, 1981).

Strong families live in ways that do not generate unnecessary crises; and when life's unavoidable crises do occur, strong families react in ways which tend to minimize the deleterious effects of the crisis and maximize the beneficial effects.

Perhaps the greatest gift strong families have is the ability to reframe a crisis, the ability to redefine what is happening. A crisis can be seen as a time of troubles, but a crisis also can be seen as a catalyst for growth and positive change.

We are told by our Chinese graduate students that the ancient Chinese pictograph for crisis is a composite symbol with two elements: danger and opportunity. Going back several thousand years, then, a crisis has been seen by the Chinese as a difficult time and a time of new possibilities. Strong families tend to see crises in this way also.

When studying a relatively random sample of families, researchers generally find that some families are torn apart by a crisis; other families neither gain nor lose as a result of the crisis, simply muddling through; and some families become closer and stronger as a direct result of a crisis. Strong families tend to fall into this latter category, having the creativity, the tenacity, and the skill to make the best of bad situations.

A Practical Definition of Love

People often ask why we do not see love as one of the six clusters of qualities which contribute to a family's strength. In fact, when you ask people to spontaneously list the qualities which make their family strong, love comes up more than any other word.

The trouble with love, of course, is that there is little agreement on its definition. We believe, however, that the strong families in our studies tell us much about the nature of love. The families have made it clear to us that love is both a feeling people have for each other, and positive actions they exhibit toward one another. Love, then, is apparent in a family which demonstrates the six qualities. We like to conceptualize it as a circle, really a three-dimensional globe, with the six qualities all interconnected and inseparable around the outside of the globe, and at the center of the globe is love.

Love is made manifest by the kindness family members share with each other, day by day, second by second.

The Relevance of Family Strengths Research for Agricultural Economists

Agricultural economists are in a far better position than the authors of this paper to judge the utility of family strengths research for their own discipline. But it is our impression from listening to agricultural economists talk at length about their research on financially successful farms

that only a small percentage of the variance between successful and unsuccessful operations can be predicted using the traditional agricultural economics measures.

As family scientists, we would hypothesize that some of the variance between successful and unsuccessful farms could be explained by measuring family strengths and stresses. Thinking back on the model of six clusters of family strengths, it is relatively simple to develop some very relevant research questions:

- (1) How does the level of family commitment individuals have for each other in farm families relate to financial success?
- (2) Do appreciation and affection enhance self-esteem, boost morale, and increase productivity in farm families?
- (3) Are open, honest, and positive communication patterns in farm families related to financial success?
- (4) How do farm families balance family time and time spent maintaining the farm operation? What is the optimal arrangement in terms of family values and financial success?
- (5) What is the connection between spiritual well-being (optimism, religious/ethical values, mental health, oneness with the world, community bonds) and farm financial success?
- (6) And, how do farm families' various strategies for coping with stress and crisis relate to financial success?

Family researchers have spent nearly 70 years developing methods for measuring family strengths and stresses. Along parallel lines, agricultural economists have been refining their techniques for measuring financial success of farming operations. After nearly 70 years, it's about time the two research traditions started talking with each other.

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