Occupational Choices of Rural Youth

Something about being reared in farm areas handicaps a person in competition for more lucrative nonfarm jobs

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Some farm boys develop a desire to become farmers and some do not. Those who do want to become farmers lack interest in the nonfarm world and are, as a result, less likely to develop the knowledge and aspirations that will lead them to perform adequately if they do not become farmers. Those who decide not to farm tend to develop knowledge and aspirations that will aid them in pursuing nonfarm careers. Youth who live in isolated areas may also have limited knowledge about the nonfarm world and tend to have low levels of aspiration and subsequent low levels of achievement. Still, the more powerful influence is the young person's plan regarding farming: planning to farm is associated with drastically lower levels of educational and occupational aspiration.

THIS PAPER is concerned with the causes and consequences of variations in the process of educational and occupational choices of farm youth and is devoted primarily to boys who leave farming. The vast majority of farm boys enter nonfarm jobs. Data on their nonfarm occupational achievement are more readily available than are data on the success of boys who stay in farming.

Data reported in this analysis are taken from many sources because most reports deal with only a few limited aspects of the total process. Nevertheless, the scattered evidence, when pieced together, seems to form an intelligible picture. One should have information on the same individuals taken over a long period of time in order to generalize to American farm youth as a body. However, it would require 20 to 25 years to complete such studies. Longitudinal studies of this nature are further limited by the changing nature of the occupational and educational structure of the nation. By the time such studies were completed the form of the process could

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have changed so drastically that inferences to those preparing to enter occupations could be formulated on nothing more than educated guesses.

Occupational and Educational Alternatives

Fundamental alternatives among which the young person is forced to choose, either by intent or default, are presented primarily by an urban-industrial occupational world. Indeed we interpret the educational system as a mechanism for training youth, first, to perform more or less well in a complex, interdependent, and highly organized occupational system (which is itself primarily an urban phenomenon) and, second, to be able to live peaceably in close proximity to others—again an urban phenomenon.

But it is not our intent to concentrate on the meaning of education. It is enough to point out that occupations are ranked[1] and that education is the major social mechanism for distributing persons into the various levels of the occupational order. Hence, the young person's performance in the educational system highly influences his level of achievement in the occupational system. (With a few individual exceptions, there is a high correlation between the number of years of school completed and the prestige level of occupational achievement.)

Yet, there are important changes going on in the occupational structure and in its relationship to the educational system. We must take some of these changes into account if our planning for rural youth is to be realistic. Each year new occupations emerge and old ones disappear. Also, occupations change; new duties are developed and old ones are eliminated. Most of the occupations coming into being are more exacting and complex. Similarly, new duties being added to old occupations tend to be more complex than were the discarded ones. As a result, demands for highly educated workers are increasing. Since practically all of the basic tasks of preparing people to perform well in complex occupations (developing numerical, logical, and literary skills, as well as training people to be good leaders, followers, and co-workers) falls to the schools, it is likely that ties between the educational system and occupational structure will become even closer than in the past.

Practically all boys who enter farming come from farm backgrounds; yet only a small fraction of those born on farms can expect to become farmers. One generally accepted estimate is that about 1 in 10 to 1 in 16 boys living on farms can expect to become

[1] Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *Occupations and Social Status* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

mmercial farm operators:[2] practically all the available land has been taken over; farms are becoming fewer in number and larger in size; the number of boys reared on farms far exceeds the number of farms which become available. Consequently, a large proportion of the farm-reared boys decide to go directly into nonfarm occupations. Even so, the number of boys who plan to farm exceeds, by a large amount, the number of farms available to them. (Probably not as many as half of those who plan to farm will be farming when they are adults.)

Thus, the great majority of farm youth who enter the labor force, now and for the foreseeable future, will find themselves in nonfarm jobs. The quality of the job each youth enters, and his ability to make a success of it, will depend largely on the amount and quality of education he receives. However, farm people, on the average, tend to believe that education is not as important for those who plan to farm as for those who do not. Some argue that education is not very important for those entering farming. But performing effectively in a highly competitive agricultural market probably depends on the same sets of high-level abilities that are required for competence in the nonfarm world.[3] It follows that education is probably closely tied to effective performance in farming just as it is in other occupations. Doubtless, these ties will become stronger as time goes on.

Numerous studies on the nonfarm occupational success of farm people show that those reared on farms are much less likely to be successful than are those reared in cities.[4] A 1952 report, for example, shows that, at that time, farm-reared people in urban areas were more highly concentrated in manual labor jobs—much less in the professional and semi-professional jobs—than were urban-reared people. Their income was lower and they tended less often to see themselves as members of the middle or upper classes.[5] A nation-

[2] Lester V. Manderscheid, "Farm Careers for Farm Youth," *Michigan Farm Economics,* Department of Agricultural Economics and Cooperative Extension Service Publication No. 244 (East Lansing: Michigan State University, May, 1963).

[3] James H. Copp, for example, has shown that such "urban" factors as "professionalism" and "mental flexibility" are characteristic of farmers who use new farming techniques. See his "Toward Generalization in Farm Practice Research," *Rural Sociology,* XXIII (June, 1958), 106-108.

[4] A brief summary of a number of concrete findings in this area is provided in Lee G. Burchinal (with Archibald O. Haller and Marvin Taves), *Career Choices of Rural Youth in a Changing Society,* North Central Regional Research Bulletin No. 412 (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, November, 1962). Also, for detailed bibliography, see Glen H. Elder, "Achievement Orientations and Career Patterns of Rural Youth," *Sociology of Education,* XXXVII (Fall, 1963), 30-58.

[5] Ronald Freedman and Deborah Freedman, "Farm-Reared Elements in the Nonfarm Population," *Rural Sociology,* XXI (March, 1956), 50-61.

wide survey conducted in 1962 reports that, in all age groups, farm-reared persons employed in nonfarm work are over-represented in "blue-collar" and under-represented in "white-collar" occupations.[6] Such findings cannot be attributed simply to the presence of a certain ethnic or racial group; they hold for all samples, irrespective of area of the country or of composition of the samples. There is something about being reared in farm areas which handicaps a person in the competition for the more lucrative and prestigeful nonfarm jobs.

Factors Influencing Choices

Farm boys are usually reared in a situation where farming as a way of life and as an occupation is stressed. Ordinarily both parents were raised on or in close contact with the farm. Relatives and neighbors are usually farmers. Probably most farm boys are brought up to expect to become farmers. The farm boy doubtless learns that it is good to work out-of-doors, take care of animals, breathe fresh air, to do and be all the things that are commonly believed to be part of farming. Besides, those with whom he interacts when away from home—the storekeeper, gas station attendant, teacher, and other youngsters in school—tend to think of him and to treat him as a farmer. So it is hardly surprising that many farm boys report that they plan to be farmers. The fact that needs explanation is that so many of them decide to leave farming.

There are apparently at least three sets of factors which may be plausibly interpreted as inducing some boys to plan to leave farming and others to plan to become farmers: (1) personality; (2) the degree to which the parents stress farming for boys; and (3) the resources available to boys for entering farming.

The small amount of data available on personality correlates of farm residence and of planning to farm are inconsistent with widely held myths about the personalities of farm people. One Michigan project, in a good agricultural county within an industrial area, showed, among other things, that farm boys tended to be lower in measured intelligence, more submissive, more tied to relatives and to the local area, and lower in faith in their own ability to influence events than were nonfarm boys.[7] These findings are of interest be-

[6] Calvin L. Beale, John C. Hudson, and Vera J. Banks, *Characteristics of the U.S. Population by Farm and Nonfarm Origin,* Agricultural Economics Report No. 66 (Washington: Economic Research Service, U.S.D.A., December, 1964).

[7] A. O. Haller and Carole Ellis Wolff, "Personality Orientations of Farm, Village, and Urban Boys," *Rural Sociology,* XXVII (September, 1962), 275-93; and the same writers' "A Note on 'Personality Orientations of Farm, Village, and Urban Boys,'" *Rural Sociology,* XXX (September, 1965), 338-40.

use they appear to show a general pattern of conventionality, dependence upon the judgment of others, and a lower ability and motivation to perform well in nonfarm occupations. In another study, based on data from boys near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, farm boys scored lower than nonfarm working class and middle class boys on indexes measuring entrepreneurial values and knowledge.[8]

Findings of the above mentioned Michigan study regarding personality differences between farm boys who plan to farm and those who do not plan to farm show that those who do not plan to farm are more adventurous, more independent, have more control over their behavior, and have greater character stability.[9] While this study did not find differences in measured intelligence between the two groups, other studies reveal that those planning to farm have lower intelligence scores.[10] In general, we can conclude that a greater proportion of those boys who plan to leave farming develop personalities that are open to new ideas than do those who plan to farm. In short, those who plan nonfarm careers are more likely to be "nonconformists"; those who plan to farm, typically, are more likely to be "conformists."

Studies conducted in Iowa and Michigan show that, despite the general social support for farming as an occupation for boys, parents of farm boys fairly often urge them to take nonfarm jobs. Generally, those boys plan to leave farming whose parents have higher than average educational and occupational aspirations for them.[11]

The same Michigan study showed that those boys who came from small families were more likely to plan to farm than were others—probably a reflection of the relatively low competition among farm boys from small families for the available limited resources.

Finally, the best available evidence[12] shows that when a boy's anticipated or actual economic resources for entering farming are

[8] Murray A. Straus and Cecelia E. Sudia, "Entrepreneurial Orientation of Farm, Working Class, and Middle Class Boys," *Rural Sociology,* XXX (September, 1965), 291-98b.

[9] A. O. Haller, "The Occupational Achievement Process of Farm-Reared Youth in Urban-Industrial Society," *Rural Sociology,* XXV (September, 1960), 321-33. Additional personality data are presented in Murray A. Straus, "Societal Needs and Personality Characteristics in the Choice of Farm, Blue Collar, and White Collar Occupations by Farmers' Sons," *Rural Sociology,* XXIX (December, 1964), 408-25, esp. Table 1, 410-11.

[10] Donald R. Kaldor *et al., Occupational Plans of Iowa Farm Boys,* Research Bulletin 508 (Ames: Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station, September, 1962); A. O. Haller, "The Influence of Planning to Farm on Plans to Attend College," *Rural Sociology,* XXII (June, 1957), 137-41; and Straus, *op. cit.*

[11] Kaldor *et al., ibid.;* and Haller (1960), *op. cit.*

[12] Kaldor *et al., ibid.*

high, he will tend to plan to farm; conversely, when his economic resources are low he will tend to plan not to farm.

We interpret these findings to mean that a boy will plan not to farm: (1) if his personality gives him a readiness to break out of the characteristic ways of behavior and thought of farm people; (2) if his parents want him to take a nonfarm job; or (3) if his economic resources for entering farming are quite low. On the other hand, he will plan to farm if the opposite of these conditions exists.

Other Factors

But there appears to be another factor mediating between the personality of the youth and his parents' mobility aspirations for him on the one hand and plans regarding farming on the other. Although the exact chain of relations has not been established, it is quite clear that boys who plan to farm are strongly influenced by non-monetary values commonly associated with farming. Kaldor and others, for example, have shown that many farm boys say they are willing to become farmers even if it means a considerable financial loss as compared to a nonfarm job.[13] Some of the non-monetary values preferred more often by those who plan to farm are out-of-doors work, physical activity, work with machines and tools, work in the local community, contact with people,[14] and a relative dislike for change.[15]

Our guess is that, primarily, such value orientations as these are rejected by the farm boys who are nonconformists or whose parents encourage upward mobility. Similarly, we think that the conformists and the boys whose parents do not encourage upward mobility probably agree with values such as these. On the other hand, there is little reason to suspect that such value orientations are related to the availability of financial resources even though the availability of such resources is correlated with planning to farm. In other words, there is reason to think that monetary resources exert a direct effect on plans regarding farming as an occupation but that personality and parents' mobility aspiration orientations for their sons indirectly exert influence on the plan regarding farming—through their effect on accepting or rejecting the values regarding farming and values associated with nonfarm occupations.

Aspiration and Achievement

We have already alluded to the fact that it is difficult to measure

[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Haller (1960), *op. cit.*

the relationships between levels of educational and occupational aspiration during high school and subsequent levels of educational and occupational achievement. Even so, there are substantial intercorrelations among these four variables. Among high school youth, levels of educational and occupational aspiration appear to be better predictors of levels of educational and occupational achievement years later than are any other known variables.[16] It seems safe to say that levels of educational and occupational achievement in adult life are substantially influenced by levels of educational and occupational aspiration in youth.

The Effects of Planning to Farm

Once formed, plans regarding farming appear to have important consequences for the rest of the boy's career. Intentions to farm or not to farm greatly influence levels of nonfarm occupational aspirations and plans regarding post-high-school education. Similarly, such plans appear to influence the youth's information-seeking activities concerning nonfarm occupations. One reason for these relationships is the widespread belief that educational and occupational information are important only for boys who do not plan to farm.[17] Moreover, all studies presenting data on the question have shown that boys who plan to farm have much lower levels of educational aspiration than farm-reared boys who plan nonfarm careers.[18] Those who plan to farm seek occupational information less actively,[19] spend less of their school time in nonagricultural courses,[20] and know less about the occupational world[21] than do boys who do not plan to farm.

The evidence overwhelmingly supports the proposition that if a boy decides to farm—a decision which often becomes firm before the 10th grade[22]—he seals himself off from occupational informa-

[16] Archibald O. Haller and Irwin W. Miller, *The Occupational Aspiration Scale: Theory, Structure, and Correlates,* Technical Bulletin 288 (East Lansing: Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, 1963); and Charles B. Nam and James D. Cowhig, *Factors Related to College Attendance of Farm and Nonfarm High School Graduates:* 1960, Farm Population Series Census—ERS [P 27], No. 32 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce and U.S.D.A., June 15, 1962).

[17] Haller (1960), *op. cit.*

[18] Kaldor *et al., op. cit.;* Haller (1960) (1957), *op. cit.;* Straus, *op. cit.;* and Lee G. Burchinal, "Differences in Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Farm, Small-Town, and City Boys," *Rural Sociology,* XXVI (June, 1961), 107-21.

[19] Lee G. Burchinal, "Who's Going to Farm?" *Iowa Farm Science,* XXIV (April, 1960), 12-15; and Straus, *op. cit.*

[20] Haller (1960), *op. cit.*

[21] Kaldor *et al., op. cit.;* Straus, *op. cit.*

[22] Kaldor *et al., ibid.*

tion around him. Farm boys who plan to farm[23] usually are insensitive to the objective requirements of today's world of work. Farm boys who do not plan to farm, however, differ only slightly from nonfarm boys in these respects.[24]

Geographical Isolation

Sheer geographic isolation evidently affects the occupational achievement process of farm youth. In fact only a few years ago sociologists thought this fact was sufficient to explain the whole phenomenon of low nonfarm achievement levels of farm-reared people.[25] As many have noted, the quality of rural elementary and secondary schools in isolated areas tends to be relatively poor. Moreover, youth in such areas do not have the opportunity for first-hand acquaintance with more than a few occupational roles. Also, they are less subjected to mass media which carry a good deal of information relevant to occupations. Finally, colleges and universities, which introduce a good deal of educational and occupational information into the communities surrounding them, are seldom located in isolated farm areas.

Obviously, the environment of the rural young person in an isolated area is less rich in information relevant to nonfarm work than

[23] Boys who plan to farm include farm boys whose value orientations, personalities, and education are not well adapted to success in the nonfarm world. But it does not follow that these characteristics are essential to being a productive and successful farmer. Given the competitive nature of modern farming and its demands for careful planning and use of complex machinery, etc., one would expect that the same characteristics are needed in farming as are needed outside of it. Among those who plan to farm, will the ones who have the personalities, value systems, and education best adapted to urban life be the ones who survive in farming?

There is also a large group whose decision to enter farming rests on the fact that they or their parents have sufficient financial resources to enable them to enter farming rather easily (see Kaldor *et al., op. cit.*). Are these going to be people whose value systems, personalities, and education make them somewhat incompetent to deal with modern farming? If such speculations are accurate or valid they would suggest that future successful farmers may consist of (1) a group of people whose personalities and value orientations are not very adequate for modern farming but whose families were well-to-do and (2) perhaps another group whose personalities and value orientations are relatively adequate for modern farming, but whose families are not very well off. Moreover, these speculations suggest that those who plan to farm but are unable to compete will be those whose personalities, values, aspirations, education, and resources are least effective, not only for farming but also for nonfarm work. However, it should be clearly understood that these speculations go far beyond present research data.

[24] Burchinal (1961), *op. cit.;* Haller (1960), *op. cit.;* and A. O. Haller, "Research Problems on the Occupational Achievement Levels of Farm-Reared People," *Rural Sociology,* XXIII (December, 1958), 355-62.

[25] Seymour M. Lipset, "Social Mobility and Urbanization," *Rural Sociology,* XX (September-December, 1955), 220-28; and Haller (1958), *op. cit.*

of the young person in less isolated rural and urban areas. Most search on the subject has shown that farm youth (even those who do not plan to farm) tend to have lower educational and occupational aspirations than other rural or urban youth.[26]

The Combination of Farm Plans and Isolation

Evidently, then, there are two factors which work in parallel to form a mental set which later influences the nonfarm occupational access of youth: geographic isolation and plans regarding farming. In combination, these influences can be described as follows: Youth who live in relatively isolated areas and who plan to become farmers typically have the lowest average levels of educational and occupational aspiration. They have the most limited access to information and are least likely to perceive available information as relevant. The next two groups include (1) boys who plan to farm and who live in less isolated rural areas and (2) farm boys living in more isolated rural areas who do not plan to farm. The evidence suggests that planning to farm is related more closely with aspiration levels than is degree of isolation. Thus it is speculated that the more isolated farm youth who do not plan to farm have higher aspiration levels than the less isolated youth who plan to farm. Access to information about education and jobs may favor the less isolated youth. Finally, youth who do not plan to farm and who have considerable contact with nonfarm life have the highest levels of educational and occupational aspiration. (There is little or no difference in the levels of aspiration between farm boys in this group and nonfarm boys.)[27]

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to glean from available research literature on educational and occupational choices of farm boys an overview of the process by which their occupational performance is influenced. The result is a set of hypotheses. However, these must be used with caution because some of the data upon which valid generalizations must be based are simply missing. At minimum they may serve as a basis for the research which must be done. At maxi-

[26] For some of the more recent evidence see William H. Sewell, "Community of Residence and College Plans," *American Sociological Review*, XXIX (February, 1964), 24-38; and William H. Sewell and Alan M. Orenstein, "Community of Residence and Occupational Choice," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXX (March, 1965), 551-63.

[27] Rural-urban differences in the aspirations and achievements of girls are in the same directions as those of boys, but are not as large. This is evidently because girls do not plan to farm; they are affected only by the factor of geographic isolation.

mum, if used with proper care, they may be of practical value in developing programs which can alleviate, in a humane way, the occupational problems which rural youth face.

Suggestions for practical action, together with limitations of each, follow:

1. Increasing the accessibility and quality of rural schools, including colleges, will probably improve the chances for occupational success of rural youth, including those from farms. Such programs could reduce the effects of geographic isolation. But the effects of isolation are not very great today and are not at the heart of the most important problems. Farm boys who plan not to farm generally differ only slightly from nonfarm boys. Research seems to indicate that farm boys who plan to farm will be confronted with the central problem.

2. In-school guidance programs might conceivably be designed to raise levels of educational and occupational aspiration. There is no experimental evidence as to the consequences, including possible undesirable side effects, of programs designed to raise levels of aspiration. At the very least, however, careful experiments could be conducted in a limited manner giving attention to raising aspirations of low-aspiring youngsters of unusual ability.

3. Programs aimed specifically at reducing the adverse effects of planning to farm seem likely to achieve more success if they treat the central problem, the low nonfarm occupational aspiration of farm boys who plan to farm. For example, in-school guidance programs might be set up to make these boys more conscious of the difficulties in establishing themselves as farmers. This should have the effect of making them more attentive to the objective requirements of the nonfarm world. Thus, educational and occupational aspirations, and the achievement levels which appear to be partially under their control, could probably be raised. However, if tried, this should be studied carefully because planning to farm is closely tied to other personality and value characteristics, and undesirable side effects might well occur.

4. School-based programs designed to work through parents and other "reference groups" might be tried. These have been successful with urban working class parents; we do not know whether they would work with more dispersed farm people. Such programs should concentrate on presenting unbiased, objective information about the realities of entering and being successful in farming, and about the requirements of success in the nonfarm labor market. They should be based on accurate data and be aimed at reducing the number of boys who unrealistically plan to enter farming.