

Who Joins Farm Organizations?

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Those who work with farmers in educational and other programs are always seeking ways of working with clientele on a collective basis rather than a one-to-one basis. However, at this point, our ability to characterize those who seek out or submit themselves to organized efforts is limited. This article reviews the differences between farmers who join general farm organizations and those who don't. The author discusses involvement in farming, relevant felt needs, and anticipated success as factors that may influence joining.

THERE IS NO lack of organizations for farmers to join. For example, Breimyer¹ reports over 21,000 farmer cooperative associations with an estimated membership of almost 22 million. However, these figures probably include dual and triple memberships. The fact is that the majority of farmers aren't associated with any farm organization. Why not? This article explores that question by reviewing the findings of a recent Wisconsin study.²

A sample of Wisconsin farm operators were asked about their membership in four different farm organizations (Farm Bureau, Farmers' Union, National Farmers' Organization, and the Grange), plus their extent and kind of patronage of farmers' cooperatives. Out of the 674 respondents, 254 (38%) said they are members of one or more of the four farm organizations. Another 225 (33%) reported that, while not currently members of any of the four farm organizations, they do patronize supply and purchasing cooperatives. Of the remaining 195 (29%), 170 said they sell at least some products, or obtain some services, through farmers' cooperatives.

¹ Harold F. Breimyer, *Individual Freedom and the Economic Organization of Agriculture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 136.

² *The Wisconsin Farm Organization and Cooperatives: Membership and Patronage*, Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 581 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1966). This is an initial report in the Wisconsin Farm Organization Study, Donald E. Johnson and W. K. Warner, Project Leaders.

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Remember, however, that cooperatives are not occupational associations in the sense that the more general farm organizations are. Cooperatives are oriented toward answering specific economic demands which frequently are relevant to only a limited sector of the farmer public. General farm organizations are oriented to a much wider spectrum of farmers' needs. Their activities are geared primarily for representation and collective action, rather than direct service. Only four per cent of the farmers reported having no regular contact with the organizations studied. However, only about 38 per cent can be considered as organized on an occupational basis.

Cooperatives as well as general farm organizations are interested in wide membership. Cooperatives want to increase their volume of business and the economic benefits to their members. Farm organizations have to widen their representativeness, and increase their political and economic bargaining power. But again, there is an important difference. Increased benefits to members of cooperatives may be achieved not only through increased membership, but also through increased volume of business of the present members. The effectiveness and power of the general farm organizations, on the other hand, is more closely linked to the size of their membership. For them, the greater their membership, the greater their power, influence, and potential for effective action on behalf of farmers.

But why don't the majority affiliate with any general farm organization? Warner and Heffernan³ suggest it's the "benefit-participation contingency." If you can benefit from farm organizations without being a member, why join and pay dues? Joining would mean paying for something you can get for nothing.

This explanation has intuitive appeal, but it raises another question: Why do other farmers join? What benefits of membership do they see that nonmembers do not? What are the differences between those who join and those who do not? If there are any differences, how can they account for membership or nonmembership?

Characteristics of Members of Farm Organizations

There are a number of socioeconomic characteristics that seem to be associated consistently with membership in farm organizations. Campbell⁴ found that joiners of farm organizations enjoy higher

³ W. Keith Warner and William D. Heffernan, "The Benefit-Participation Contingency in Voluntary Farm Organizations," *Rural Sociology*, XXXII (June, 1967), 139-53.

⁴ Rex R. Campbell, *The Joiners . . . What Are They Like?*, Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 786 (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1962).

prestige in their community than nonjoiners. Joiners also have larger farms and their general social participation score is higher. In another study, Campbell and Lionberger⁵ report significant differences between members and nonmembers in a number of economic characteristics, including size of farm, size of herd, and gross farm income, with the members tending towards the higher end of the scale. The same characteristics, with the addition of formal education, were also found by Morrison⁶ to differentiate between joiners and nonjoiners of farm organizations. Parkum,⁷ analyzing the data from the Wisconsin study mentioned earlier, found the same differences. He also found that members have more contact with Extension agents, spend less time in off-the-farm work, and patronize cooperatives more than nonmembers do (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of farmers' characteristics that have been found correlated to membership in farm organizations.

Characteristic	Studies				Number of studies
	Campbell 1962	Campbell & Lionberger 1963	Morrison 1966	Parkum 1967	
Larger farms	x	x	x	x	4
Higher gross farm income		x	x	x	3
Larger herds		x			1
Less off-farm work				x	1
More patronization of cooperatives				x	1
More formal education			x	x	2
Higher prestige	x				1
More social participation	x				1
More contact with Extension				x	1

⁵ Rex R. Campbell and Herbert F. Lionberger, "Adopters and Non-Adopters of an Idea in Uninstitutionalized Communication Systems," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California, 1963.

⁶ Denton E. Morrison, "Who Joins the General Farm Organizations and Why?" speech presented at Farmers' Week, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1966.

⁷ Kurt H. Parkum, "An Analysis of the Relationship Between Selected Social and Economic Characteristics and Membership in Farm Organizations" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1967).

Involvement in Farming

The first four characteristics in Table 1 may be classified under what Morrison calls "involvement in farming."⁸ The farmer who has a large farm, in terms of acres, total investment, or size of herd, who derives a high income from his farm, and who works rarely if ever off his farm may be assumed to be highly involved in farming. The more of these items that apply to an individual the more likely he will be highly involved in farming. The Wisconsin study also found age correlated to membership. There were more members among lower than among higher age groups. Relating this finding to involvement in farming, it seems reasonable that the nearer a man gets to retirement age, the less involved he will be in farming. Table 2 shows this relationship between involvement in farming and membership status.

Table 2. Per cent of members, former members, and never-members having the characteristics of high involvement in farming.*

Characteristic	Members (N=251)	Former members (N=153)	Never- members (N=267)
Works less than 50 days yearly off the farm	79.0	71.1	64.9
Farms more than 150 acres of cropland	35.3	22.4	11.7
Total net worth of farm is more than \$10,000	88.5†	83.8†	78.3
Is aged less than 50 years	67.2	58.2	60.9
Gross farm income is more than \$10,000	55.0	30.0	24.6

* Adapted from Kurt H. Parkum, "An Analysis of the Relationship Between Selected Social and Economic Characteristics and Membership in Farm Organizations" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1967).

† Because of missing data, N=244 for members, and N=148 for former members.

Table 2 reiterates what has been found previously. This table shows these characteristics under "involvement in farming," while usually they've been thought of as indicators of social or economic status. What is gained by the new classification? By viewing these characteristics as indicators of involvement in farming, we can draw from social psychology to help explain *why it is* that farmers who

⁸ Morrison, *op. cit.*

have these characteristics are more likely to be members than farmers who do not have them.

Relevant Felt Needs

The crucial missing concept here is "needs." It is the biological, social, and psychological needs of men that motivate them to action. Those needs that are consciously felt motivate men to premediated action.⁹ People will generally form and join organizations to cater to the needs that they cannot satisfy by themselves. Caplow writes that "organizations are devices for accomplishing definite purposes. . . . The mechanism is established in the first place for getting things done that require the coordination of individual efforts."¹⁰ If a farmer joins a farm organization, we may assume that he does so because he feels certain needs that as an individual, he cannot satisfy, and because he believes that a farm organization can help him satisfy these needs. These needs may be to get higher prices for his produce, to demonstrate his solidarity with his neighbors who joined a certain farm organization, or to make the farmers' opinions known to the general public. By himself, he could do little to satisfy these needs; as a member of a farm organization he stands a better chance. A farmer who feels needs he perceives as relevant to the farm organization's activities is more likely to join such an organization than one who feels no such needs.

But why should one farmer have more of these relevant felt needs than another? The answer may be his involvement in farming. When a man is highly involved in farming, a greater proportion of his needs will depend on the success of his farming operation for their satisfaction. More of his felt needs are likely to be relevant to the activities of farm organizations, and the chances will be greater that he will join.

Data in Table 2 indicate that members are more involved in farming than nonmembers; however, on three of the five characteristics a majority of former members and the never-members have characteristics indicating high involvement in farming. Thus, a lack of involvement in farming cannot be the only reason why these farmers don't join farm organizations.

One answer could be this: we know that not every person automatically joins an organization if he feels needs which he cannot

⁹ A. H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper Bros., 1954), ch. 5.

¹⁰ Theodore Caplow, *Principles of Organization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), p. 119.

satisfy by himself, even if he knows that it is the organization's purpose to cater to those needs.¹¹ According to the "exchange theory" of social interaction,¹² a person will initiate interaction with others and maintain it if he perceives the ultimate benefits from this interaction to be greater than his costs in maintaining it. If he perceives the costs of interaction—either in material, social, or psychological terms—to be greater than the benefits he can expect, then he won't initiate such interaction. If it is forced on him, he will terminate it. The cost-benefit ratio of an interaction has to be favorable to the individual to motivate him either to initiate or maintain it.

Anticipated Success

The cost-benefit ratio of membership in a farm organization will appear more favorable to a farmer if he feels confident that this organization will succeed in helping him. The more confident he feels, the more favorable the cost-benefit ratio will appear. Many factors influence a man's confidence in the potential success of an organization. The probability that he will feel such confidence will be greater if he has had prior personal experience with organized activity than if he hasn't.¹³ The more of this experience he has had, and the more varied it has been, the more likely he will have confidence in the potential of organized activity.

If we return to the other characteristics that have been consistently correlated to membership, we find that they are also related to experience with organized activity. Campbell¹⁴ found that members had higher social participation scores than nonmembers. Morrison¹⁵ was able to show that members had had more formal education than nonmembers. The Wisconsin study supported these findings. It also found that members of farm organizations have more contact with Extension agents and patronize cooperatives more than nonmembers do. Table 3 shows the relationship between membership and experience with organized activity found in Wisconsin.

¹¹ Bernard Barber, "Participation and Mass Apathy in Associations," in Alvin Gouldner (ed.), *Studies in Leadership: Leadership and Democratic Action* (New York: Harper Bros., 1950), p. 486.

¹² See George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), pp. 57-72, 93-99; and Peter Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964).

¹³ David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1961), p. 198.

¹⁴ Campbell, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Morrison, *op. cit.*

We know there is some association between involvement in farming and membership on one hand, and previous experience with organized activity and membership on the other. To test our explanation of this relationship, we should try to see whether members really have more felt needs that are relevant to the farm organizations' activities, and whether they really anticipate more success for farm organizations than former and never-members.

Table 3. Per cent of members, former members, and never-members having the characteristics of much previous experience with organized activity.

Characteristic	Members (N=251)	Former members (N=153)	Never- members (N=267)
Has completed high school	42.6	30.3	24.2
Has had contact with Extension	57.1	48.0	37.0
Patronizes cooperatives	70.5	65.8	53.4

This analysis was made.¹⁶ Two indices were constructed to measure the relevant felt needs and the anticipated success for farm organizations, as felt by members, former members, and never-members. The evidence supported our hypotheses: there were significant differences between the categories of membership status on both of the two indices, and in the predicted direction. Members showed more relevant felt needs than former members, and never-members had least of all. Similarly, members anticipated more success for farm organizations than former members did, and never-members anticipated the least success of all.

Conclusion

We have found some empirical support for our interpretation of the differences between farmers who join general farm organizations and those who don't. Farmers who join tend to be those who feel more relevant needs and who anticipate more success for farm organizations. This seems to be the more immediate reason for their joining. They differ in these characteristics from both former members and never-members. The reason for this is that the members

¹⁶ Chanoch Jacobsen, "Why Don't They Join? An Analysis of Membership and Nonmembership in Farm Organizations" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1967).

are more involved in farming and have had more experience with organized activity in general.

Former members are less involved in farming and consequently have fewer relevant felt needs because, as a group, they are approaching the age of retirement. They anticipate less success for farm organizations because, being older, they have had less opportunity for formal education and organizational contact than the younger farmers.

Never-members, on the other hand, are least involved in farming and therefore have the least relevant felt needs—their farms are smaller, they have less capital invested in them, and they earn a proportion of their income from off-the-farm jobs. They tend to be older than members. They also have had less experience with formally organized activity, and therefore anticipate less success for the farm organizations.

These two factors, less perceived needs and less expected satisfaction, provide some explanation of why, despite their many common difficulties and frustrations, the majority of farmers do not belong to any of the general farm organizations.