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Anger, Conflict, and Violence Levels: A Comparison of Farm/Ranch with City/Urban Residents

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Abstract

There is a research void on comparisons of farm and non-farm residents' anger, conflict, and violence levels. The purpose was to report the results of a comparison of three groups of residents' anger, anger control, conflict, violence, personal belief, and anger management levels. Do farmers and ranchers who participate in RETHINK Parenting and Anger Management workshops have higher anger, anger control, conflict, and violence levels than town, city, or metropolitan residents? One-way Analyses of Variance revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups on most anger, anger control, family conflict, violence, personal belief, or anger management levels. Only on State Anger was there a statistically significant difference—farmers/ranchers/rural residents were *less angry*. State Anger is the intensity of angry feelings at a particular time.

Many people view living on a farm or ranch as an idyllic, stress-free family life. As opposed to urban living, rural living is pictured as a healthy environment in which to raise children, establish and maintain close family ties and friendships, and where financial concerns are reduced, especially when food is grown.

However, an examination of research explodes the myth that rural living is stress-free. Instead, a number of researchers have found that life in rural settings can have deleterious effects on individual and family functioning. Hansen and McIntire (1985, 1) reported that rural residents experience "greater incidence, prevalence, and severity of malnutrition than their urban counterparts; the nation's highest rates of maternal and infant mortality; higher unemployment and underemployment rates; a greater increase in the divorce rate; and a greater incidence of poverty, substandard housing, and contaminated drinking water." In addition, several researchers found empirical evidence of differences in emotional well being between rural and urban (or farm and non-farm) people (Amato and Zuo 1992; Blazer et al. 1985; Dottl and Greenley 1995;

Fetsch 1984; Hoyt et al. 1997; Jacob, Bourke, and Luloff 1997; Kposowa, Breault, and Singh 1995; Larson 1997; Molinari et al. 1999; Rost et al. 1998).

Researchers reported finding higher degrees of stress for rural residents, e.g., women and young generations in rural communities (Jacob, Bourke, and Luloff 1997). Farm stress levels were found to be statistically significantly higher than those of "normal" non-farmers (Fetsch 1984). While farmers' and non-farmers' adaptive coping behavior levels were comparable, farmers' maladaptive coping behavior levels were higher and exceeded those of non-farm clinical samples (Fetsch 1984). Farm and ranch families live and work in one of America's most stressful and dangerous workplaces. Farmers are second to laborers in the number of deaths from heart and artery disease, ulcers, and nervous disorders (Smith, Colligan, and Hurrell 1977).

A number of researchers reported finding higher depression levels among rural versus urban samples of people. Rural adults were found to have more depression, belligerent, bizarre behaviors, and nervous disorders and higher levels of general pathology than urban adults (Dottl and Greenley 1995). Depressed rural people were found to have a threefold higher chance of being admitted to hospitals for mental health problems (Rost et al. 1998). Men, but not women, living in rural villages of under 2,500 or in small towns of 2,500 to 9,999 people had significantly greater increases in depressive symptoms than men living in the country or in larger towns or cities (Hoyt et al. 1997). Single men without children were found to have especially high depression levels in rural versus urban areas (Amato and Zuo 1992). On admission as geropsychiatric inpatients, rural patients were reported to have more depression/anxiety, more physical problems, and at discharge to be more physically and verbally agitated and depressed/anxious (Molinari et al. 1999). However, some researchers reported major depressive disorders to be more frequent in urban areas (Blazer et al. 1985).

Some researchers also found higher suicide rates among rural residents. Depressed rural people were found to have significantly more suicide attempts (Rost et al. 1998). Rural residents were somewhat more likely than urban counterparts to report a suicide attempt, hopelessness, and a desire to stay away from others at lower levels of depression (Larson 1997). A study of suicide in UK farmers attempted to identify the reasons for death. Researchers found that the most frequent problem and the one judged to be most important in farmers' suicide was mental illness (Malmberg, Simkin, and Hawton 1999). Other problems reported in the year before death included occupational problems, relationship problems, and physical illness. Other researchers found that men who live in urban areas were at higher risk for suicide (Kposowa, Breault, and Singh 1995).

Stigma appears to be a particularly important barrier to the use of mental health care in rural settings where lack of anonymity increases the likelihood that one who seeks care will be labeled "crazy." People living in the most rural environments were found to hold negative attitudes

toward mental health care that were associated with less willingness to seek care (Hoyt et al. 1997). A rural-urban comparison study found that rural residents with a history of depressive symptoms labeled seekers of professional help for depression somewhat more negatively than their urban counterparts (Rost, Smith, and Taylor 1993). In this study, labeling was not found to be associated with the use of care among urban people with depressive symptoms.

Research comparing anger levels of farm and non-farm residents is scant. Where farm families are experiencing grief, sadness, pining, tension, anger, loneliness, anxiety, and shock, farm families are found to have suffered the loss of the family farm, homes, and property (Graham, Henjum, and Freeze 1990). No other studies were found comparing farm/ranch and non-farm/ranch anger, conflict, or violence levels.

The purpose of this article is to report the results of a comparison of three groups of residents' anger, anger control, conflict, violence, personal belief, and Rational Empathic Anger Management (REAM) levels. Group 1 includes farmers, ranchers, and people who live in a rural setting. Group 2 includes people who live in a small town or town. Group 3 includes people who live in a small city, city, or metropolis. All participants were parents who volunteered to participate in RETHINK parenting and anger management workshops (Fetsch and Schultz 2001; Fetsch, Schultz, and Wahler 1999).

Questions for this article include the following. Are farmers and ranchers who participate in RETHINK more angry or less angry than town or city residents? Are their anger control levels different? Are their family conflict levels different? Are their violence levels different? Are their personal belief levels different?

Methodology

To answer these questions, we first selected from our larger sample of more than 1,400 RETHINK Program participants all those parents who completed matched pretest and posttest surveys. These were the 323 parents who completed the six-week or longer RETHINK series of workshops. Then we used their pretest scores when they began RETHINK. We divided them into three groups:

1. Group 1 = 39 people who lived on a farm or ranch or who lived in a rural setting, not a farm or ranch.

2. Group 2 = 60 people who lived in a small town [under 2,500] or who lived in a town [2,500-10,000].

3. Group 3 = 224 people who lived in a small city [10,000-50,000] or who lived in a city [50,000-100,000] or who lived in a metropolis [over 100,000].

Materials

The *State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory* (STAXI) was used to assess participants' anger and anger control levels (Spielberger 1991, 1996). The STAXI is a paper-and-pencil inventory that asks a series of questions about a person's experience and expression of anger. The instrument consists of 44 items, that form six scales and two subscales. For the purpose of the present study, the scales used include Trait Anger; Angry Temperament; Angry Reaction; Anger-in; Anger-out; Anger Expression; and Anger Control. Participants rate themselves on four-point scales that assess either the intensity of their angry feelings or the frequency that they experience, express, suppress, or control their anger. Spielberger (1996) reported acceptable validity levels as indicated by moderate to high correlations with comparative psychological inventories for adults, college students, and adolescents. Reliability alpha coefficients are uniformly large across samples and range from .65 to .93 (Spielberger 1996, 6). Means, standard deviations, N's and scoring procedures are reported for groups of adults, college students, and adolescents (Spielberger, 1996, 4, 30-35).

The *Conflict Tactics Scale* (CTS-Form R) inventory was used to assess participants' violence levels. It can be used in telephone or face-to-face interview or paper-and-pencil format (Straus 1990a, 1990b, 1990c). It is a seven-point, 19-item questionnaire designed to assess individual responses to family situations involving conflict. Participants report how often they take a number of actions associated with ways couples handle conflict from never to more than 20 times during the past year. The CTS consists of three subscales—Reasoning, Verbal Aggression, and Physical Aggression or Violence. Separate versions are used for oneself and one's partner. Scoring procedures and percentile norms are reported elsewhere (Fetsch and Schultz 2001; Straus 1990a, 1990c). Coefficients of reliability (alphas) are high for the Verbal Aggression (.79-.80) and Physical Aggression or Violence (.82-.83) scales and low for the Reasoning scale (.50-.51) which is largely a function of having only three items on the latter scale. Acceptable validity levels are reported (Straus 1990c, 41).

The *Family Conflict Scale* is one of 15 five-item, family functioning subscales drawn by Bloom (1985) from his factor analysis of four existing scales and reported elsewhere (Fetsch and Schultz 2001). Participants described their families using a four-choice format ("very untrue for my family," "fairly untrue for my family," "fairly true for my family," and "very true for my family" (Bloom 1985, 227). In four studies, Chronbach reliability alpha coefficients ranged between .76 and .85, with a mean of .80. Average inter-item correlations ranged from .39 to .53, with a mean of .45. In two studies factor loadings ranged from .45 to .75, with a mean of .66. Acceptable validity levels were reported (Bloom 1985). Bloom and Naar (1994) reported a

Chronbach alpha of .84, a mean inter-item correlation of .50, and test-retest reliability of .88. Scoring procedures and mean scores are reported for this scale which is now called the Colorado Family Assessment (Bloom 1996; Fetsch and Schultz 2001).

Norms, scoring procedures, validity, and reliability levels are not available for the Personal Beliefs Scale or for the REAM Scale. Both were written by and used here with the permission of Susan Stutman at the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives.

Results

One-way Analyses of Variance revealed that on most dependent variables, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the three groups.

Variable	**Significance**
Trait Anger	NS
Angry Temperament	NS
Angry Reaction	NS
Anger-in	NS
Anger-out	NS
Anger Expression	NS
Anger Control	NS
Reasoning-Self	NS
Verbal Aggression-Self	NS
Physical Aggression-Self	NS
Reasoning-Other	NS
Verbal Aggression-Other	NS
Physical Aggression-Other	NS
Family Conflict Level	NS
Personal Beliefs	NS
REAM	NS

Only on one dependent variable was there a statistically significant difference between the three groups—on State Anger Levels. State Anger is defined as "the intensity of angry feelings at a

particular time" (Spielberger 1996, 1). The group of parents that lived on a farm or ranch or in a rural setting were statistically significantly *less angry* than was the group of parents who lived in a small city, city, and metropolis, $F(2, 320) = 3.71$, $p = .026$.

Group	***M***	***SD***	***N***
1	10.51	1.25	39
2	11.25	3.16	60
3	12.18	4.41	224

The mean scores of neither groups 1 and 2 nor groups 2 and 3 were statistically significantly different from each other. All three groups' mean scores were within plus or minus 1 standard deviations of Spielberger's State Anger norms (1996, 6) for adult males ($\underline{M} = 11.29$; $\underline{SD} = 3.17$; $\underline{N} = 2{,}880$) and for adult females ($\underline{M} = 12.82$; $\underline{SD} = 4.83$; $\underline{N} = 1{,}182$).

Therefore, regarding the first question—Are farmers and ranchers who participate in RETHINK angrier or less angry than town or city residents—for the most part there is no statistically significant difference. Only on State Anger levels was there a difference—farmers and rural residents were significantly *less angry*. Regarding the other research questions, farmers and ranchers and non-farmers in our sample had similar levels.

Discussion and Implications

Given the number of stresses and strains that farm and ranch families face, given the higher depression levels and suicide attempts, and given the sheer number of predicaments that ranch and farm families encounter that are outside their control (e.g., weather, market prices for their products, escalating costs of fuel, equipment, land, etc.), it is surprising to find that their anger levels are not also elevated. More research studies are needed comparing anger, conflict, and violence levels of random samples of rural and urban residents that could yield different results. Hopefully, the line of research to determine why ranch and farm families do not appear to experience the expected intensity of anger will continue. A limitation of the present study is that it included only volunteer parent participants in anger management series workshops.

Almost all the anger, conflict, and violence levels were the same for farm/ranch/rural, small town/town, and small city/city/metropolis residents. We know that individuals experience different levels of anger, ranging from disappointment to frustration to anger to rage. When it comes to rage, it is interesting that we hear about road rage, air rage, computer rage, postal rage, etc. But we do not hear about farm/ranch rage. Would the media have us believe that there is only "metro" rage? The results from this article suggest that anger and rage levels were the same

for our urban and farm samples. That State Anger levels were statistically significantly lower for farm, ranch, and rural residents may be a statistical accident.

On the other hand, perhaps this finding is a clue to a difference in the way rural people approach life. The current article is apparently the first to begin to fill a research void comparing farm and non-farm anger, conflict, and violence levels. More replication research studies are needed with random samples to see if other researchers also find that rural and non-rural residents have similar anger, conflict, and violence levels.

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