Coping with Economic Stress: Implications for Helping Professionals

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ABSTRACT: This article suggests methods for educational and service application of the research generated from the regional project, W-167, Coping with Stress: Adaptation of Nonmetropolitan Families to Socioeconomic Changes. Similarities among families studied as well as differences among state projects are highlighted. Suggestions for application center on strategies for educating rural families directly, providing information to those who work with rural families, and developing support systems conducive to the rural environment.

KEY WORDS: Coping Strategies, Family Adaptation, Helping Professionals, Support Services

An important challenge facing universities is to bring the research generated at these institutions to bear in solving problems facing families and the individuals in these families. This is especially important at land-grant universities which are charged with a three-part mission of research, teaching, and extension.

Two issues of Lifestyles: Family and Economic Issues (Vol. 9, Nos. 2 & 4) have been devoted to articles reporting results from the regional research project, W-167, Coping with Stress: Adaptation of Nonmetropolitan Families to Socioeconomic Changes. This project, supported by the Western Agricultural Experiment Stations, was charged with assessing the resources and coping strategies Western families used in response to socioeconomic change and assessing the impact of those strategies on family relationships. Information from these articles can be especially useful for teachers, extension personnel, mental-health
workers, human service providers, and other professionals who work with rural families in the Western states. The purpose of this article is to suggest methods for applying information gleaned from these articles (See Table 1).

Before describing possible program strategies to help rural families cope with the effects of economic stress, it is necessary to identify similarities in the research projects conducted in the various Western states, with regard to the families studied as well as uniqueness among the studies. It is also helpful to place these similarities within the context of a research and educational model to show how the various program strategies can interact to provide a coordinated effort to help families facing economic stress. McCubbin's Double ABCX model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) is appropriate for this discussion. This model helps explain the basic processes involved in family adaptation to stress and family crisis.

Though a detailed description is beyond the scope of this article, the basic components of the model should be outlined. Hill (1949, 1958) posited the ABCX family crisis model. In it, Hill (1958) stated that:

A (the stressor event)—interacting with B (the family’s crisis meeting resource)—interacting with C (the definition he makes of the event)—produces X (the crisis) . . . (p. 14).

The original model addressed a family's vulnerability but did not address the family's ability to adapt or recover from a crisis situation. In an effort to identify the family's resiliency, McCubbin added post-crisis factors to describe the additional changes that affect a family's ability to adapt (pile-up): the resources—material and nonmaterial—families call upon in managing stressful situations (resources), the perception families have about the crisis (perception), the coping strategies families employ to adapt (coping), and the outcome of their efforts (adaptation). Using the post-crisis aspects of the Double ABCX model, it is possible to identify concepts that transcend most of the research articles reported in the two special issues of *Lifestyles: Family and Economic Issues*.

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1. As Dorothy Price and Lonnie Dunlop point out in their articles, community economic problems occur at two levels: a micro-level (affecting individuals, families and households) and a macro-level (affecting groups, communities, regions, and the country as a whole). This article will address program opportunities at the micro-level—programs for families and individuals in those families. For an understanding of needed programs at the macro-level, the reader should refer to Voydanoff (1984).