

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVES (CCSC)

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# **Farmer Stress, Co-op Members, Problematic Solidarity, and Recommendations from Dairy: A Qualitative Analysis**

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**Occasional Paper Series**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report is a qualitative analysis of 1,000 comments from a survey of farmer-members of a dairy cooperative in the northwest U.S. Nearly all of the comments expressed some level of dis-satisfaction with the cooperative and the larger political-economy. A sociological “life-model” of analysis, following Gitterman and Germain (1980, 2021) is used to categorize various comments into particular dysfunctions: i.e. 1) maladaptive transactions, i.e. breakdowns in communications, changing and inconsistent expectations, perceived exploitive relationships, as well as 2) general unresponsiveness to meet specific member needs within the organization and 3) unresponsiveness from the larger environment, with 4) a final synthesis of comments that highlight the experiences of farmers in a historical context. Recommendations addressing solidarity are drawn from the different solidarity categories.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Preface	1
Highlights	2
Part I: Introduction	3
Analytic Model	3
Methodology	4
Part II: Written Comments	5
Problematic Solidarity	5
Lack of Solidarity between Members and Management/Employees	5
Lack of Solidarity between Members	5
Lack of Solidarity Between Members and the Board of Directors	5
Maladaptive Transactions: Within the Organization	6
Communications Breakdowns	6
Changing and Inconsistent Expectations	6
Exploitive Relationships	8
Environmental Unresponsiveness	8
Organizational Unresponsiveness	9
Environmental Non-responsiveness at the Social System Level	9
Macro-historical changes impacting members	10
Part III: Summarizing Tableau	10
Frustrations on the farm, losses in solidarity	10
Conclusion	12
Part IV: Recommendations	12
Addendum: Farmers' mental health and resources	14
References	15

## PREFACE

Space is often reserved at the end of mail surveys for respondent to make comments on whatever they may wish to say. However, it is not uncommon for these comments to go unanalyzed. They frequently are not consistent with the objectives of the larger survey and can be highly negative, e.g., "Get rid of the CEO and most of the rest," "Do we get the whole truth or the slanted truth." When comments are tangential (or not related at all) *and* negative, such comments usually get left for last in most analyses, if examined at all.

Yet written comments represent an opportunity for respondents to provide some of the most candid, unrestrained and "just waiting for the opportunity" to be expressed pieces of information. Rubin and Babbie (2007, p. 51) in their book on *Research Methodology* argue that when contextualized, written comments can provide a depth in understanding that standardized questions cannot access.

This research examines approximately 1,000 written comments of a survey of dairy cooperative members in the northwest U.S. As with any research, care is taken to preserve respondent confidentiality and not to reveal identifying information of any organization or individual. Such considerations are given greater focus in this study due to the degree of market concentration in the U.S. dairy industry, i.e. large market shares held by a limited number of firms. Therefore, not only is the name of the study organization not revealed, neither is the size of the cooperative, nor its exact location.

Focus is on dairy cooperative members located in the northwest U.S. The data were collected during 2018. All respondents are members of the same dairy cooperative.

Following Rubin and Babbie (2007), the work is conducted from a research tradition of qualitative analysis. Qualitative research seeks to document human phenomena as close to the respondents' natural setting as possible. "It relies upon reports from the direct lived experiences of subjects...in their everyday lives (UTA 2022, p.1)." Contextually perhaps the two most predominant macro influences on farm structure, and farmer experience have been globalization and industrialization. These latter two forces (among others) have pushed scale in farming to such a degree as to drive massive losses in farm numbers and farm displacements, and to deepen a sense of powerlessness among farmers in the face of these large macro socio-economic forces (See Brown and

Schafft 2019, "Farms, Farmers, and Farming in Contemporary Rural Society").

This author further relies upon a self "standpoint epistemology" (and autoethnology) as part of a qualitative research approach, in drawing upon his own experiences growing up in a dairy farming area, in a village of 80 people surrounded by dairy farms--himself embedded within multiple kinship-related dairies. Dairy cooperatives had been the predominant form of milk assembly, processing and marketing in the area. Historically, farm organization in the region has had a smaller-scale kinship structure, though existing in a context of progressive industrialization and globalization.

This writing has been informed by the work of Ryan 2012; Griffin 2009; and Rolin 2009 (standpoint epistemology) and Adams (2015) (autoethnology) on developing knowledge that is in-part, contextualized by the author's own life experiences and positions of relative powerlessness. Given the qualitative nature of the work, the mode of exposition is in sentence-narrative form, following the research traditions of "interpretive sociology," i.e. putting oneself in the proverbial shoes of someone else to understand the other's viewpoint (see Segal (2018, p.3) *Social Empathy: The art of understanding others*).

The report is presented in four parts: 1) Part I, provides an *Introduction* including a discussion of the *analytic model* and a brief *methodology*; 2) Part II, presents a selection of *respondent comments* representing the categories suggestive from the analytic model; 3) Part III provides a *Summarizing Tableau* that brings respondent comments together into an organized whole--as influenced by the *author's standpoint* and as affectively toned to highlight the respondents' sense of powerlessness and frustration; and 4) Part IV presents *recommendations* keyed to the comments and the analytic model. The paper is also informed by and relies upon Gray (1996). A section "Addendum: Farmers' Mental Health Resources" is added at the end of the documents to provide contact information for farmers, farm managers, as well as farm workers.

## HIGHLIGHTS

Historically individual dairy farmers have been at a power disadvantage in the marketplace due to their small-scale relative to the size of both supply provisioning input firms and dairy product marketers. These market disadvantages are compounded by the fragility of milk itself, leaving farmers in a dilemma encapsulated in the trope “sell it or smell it.” “Sell it or smell it” sums up the uncompromising position individual farmers face. Given milk’s fragility, they must either take or refuse the price offered by more powerful market participants. To reject the price offered is to risk a very quick deterioration and total loss of their product. However, to accept a low price, as many farmers have had to do historically, can then place them into a cost-price squeeze. Low returns per unit of product, combined with high costs of inputs have placed many in a double bind—often eventuating in bankruptcies and/or acquisition by neighboring farmers.

To off-set this disadvantage, dairy farmers have organized cooperatives, to 1) buy collectively in bulk from suppliers 2) to sell collectively to marketers and to 3) develop their own consumer markets for fresh milk and 4) to create and market such processed products as butter, powder, cheese, ice-cream, yogurt, among other products.

Dairy cooperatives are member-producer organizations. To be effective in the marketplace requires degrees of continuing solidarity among the member-producers.

However, member solidarity can be fragmented by the various frustrations dairy farmers have had to face historically.

Little research has been directed toward assessing member stress and felt alienation of dairy members and its implication for member solidarity.

This research examines written comments of a survey of cooperative members of a dairy cooperative located in the northwest U.S.

The name of the cooperative is not disclosed, nor is the exact location of the cooperative to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. (See details on the approach to the study in the Preface.)

The analysis relies upon an “ecological-life-model” approach developed by Gitterman and Germain (1980, 2021) to categorize the written comments of the study, ultimately

sorting for conflicts and cleavages among members and between members and the organization.

The model posits several factors, including:

- 1) “maladaptive influences”—in terms of poor communications, exploitive relationships, and inconsistent expectations within the organization,
- 2) unresponsiveness of the environment—in terms of poor to little support from the cooperative, and/or from the larger society, and
- 3) the various life transitions that dairy farmers find themselves in, as the larger socio-economy changes,

each factor producing stress and frustration among the membership, thereby de-stabilizing cooperative member solidarity.

Recommendations are drawn for resolving these difficulties in a manner consistent with respondent comments.

Perhaps most importantly the report concludes that when members act together, they build their collective strength as dairy farmers. To make cooperatives work, they must participate and involve themselves with their fellow dairy farmers. Being heard is a start both for the members and the cooperative as an organization. In the last analysis, managers, employees, and elected offices must constantly remember the simple but profound fact that the cooperative is the members’ organization.

**PART I: INTRODUCTION**

Historically individual dairy farmers have been at a power disadvantage in the marketplace. This has in-part been due to their small-scale relative to the size of both supply provisioning input firms and dairy product marketers. These market disadvantages are compounded by the fragility of milk itself, leaving farmers in a dilemma encapsulated in the trope “sell it or smell it.” “Sell it or smell it” sums the uncompromising position individual farmers face. Given milk’s fragility, producers must either take or refuse the price offered by more powerful market participants. To reject the price offered is to risk a very quick deterioration and total loss of their product. However, to accept a low price, as many farmers have had to do historically, can then drive them into a cost-price squeeze. Low returns per unit of product, combined with high costs of inputs have placed many farmers in a double bind—often eventuating in bankruptcies and/or acquisition by neighboring farmers.

To off-set these disadvantages, farmers have organized cooperatives to 1) buy collectively in bulk from suppliers 2) to sell collectively to marketers 3) to develop their own consumer markets for fresh milk and 4) to create and market such processed products as butter, powder, cheese, ice-cream, yogurt, among others. However, to be effective as a cooperative requires degrees of continuing solidarity and commitment among the membership and with the organization (Manchester 1982; Knapp 1960; Guth 1982; Schwarzweller and Davidson 2000.)

In a cooperative context, solidarity generally refers to the socio-economic, behavioral and emotional bonds that link members to each other and to the respective organizational entity. When lasting splits occur among members and/or between members and employees and the organization, the solidarity needed for continued cooperative effectiveness can be compromised (Fairbarin 2006; Bryne et al 2015; Huber 2012; Jussila 2012; Forsyth 2009; Beal 2003; Casey-Campbell 2009; Eisenberg 2007).

However, maintaining solidarity is not an easy task. Very frequently farmers are under tremendous pressures to maintain the solvency of their farms; farms that have been held within life-times of socio-economic and familial struggles for survival (see Papas 2020 *Unique pressures put America’s farmers under stress*).

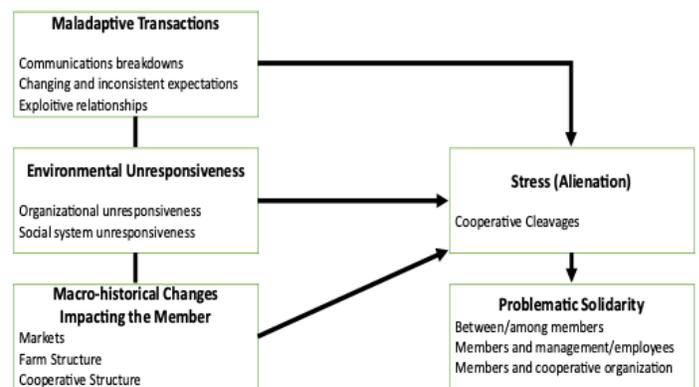
The purpose of this work is to bring some better clarity to dairy farmer stress when understood within the context of multiple socio-economic factors and how this particular context impacts farmer solidarity within a cooperative. Applied recommendations are drawn from these results.

**Analytic Model**

A multi-determinant model is adapted from Gitterman and Germain’s (2021) work on individual stress, though expanded from a micro social-psychological perspective to include a fuller consideration of socio-economic influences. Focus is given to 1) “maladaptive transactions” between and among members and the organization (e.g. communication breakdowns, inconsistent expectations, perceived exploitive relationships), 2) “environmental unresponsiveness” (e.g. cooperative organizational and societal non-responsiveness) and 3) “life transitions” (understood in a dairy farmer context as historical changes in markets, farm structures, and cooperative structures). Stress is understood as manifested in divisions and cleavages among the membership and with the larger organization—eventuating as problematic solidity (see Figure 1).

The model is used as a framework to categorize written comments from a larger survey of dairy cooperative members in the northwest U.S. Intent in its use is consistent with Segal’s (2018) approach—explained in *Social Empathy*--of blending understandings, feelings and actions of others--on an individual plane--with insights from a more macro socio-economic history (p.3).

Figure 1: Life Model of Cooperative Member Stress (Alienation)



Adapted from Gitterman and Germain (1980 p.11, 2021)

## Methodology

Space is often reserved at the end of mail surveys for respondents to make comments on whatever they may wish to say. However, it is not uncommon at technical assistance levels, and broader, for such comments to go unanalyzed. They frequently are not consistent with the objectives of the larger survey, as well as being highly negative, e.g., “Get rid of the CEO and most of the rest,” “Do we get the whole truth or the slanted truth.” Typically tangential (or not related at all) and negative can be deadly in terms of supposedly “finding time” for analysis. They often end up being last if ever examined.

Yet written comments represent an opportunity for respondents to provide some of the most candid, unrestrained and “just waiting for the opportunity” to be expressed pieces of information. Rubin and Babbie (2007, p.361) in their book on *Research Methodology* argue that when contextualized, written comments can provide a depth in understanding that standardized questions generally cannot access.

This research examines approximately 1,000 written comments of a survey of dairy cooperative members. An initial review revealed many of the comments were toned with a sense of frustration and powerlessness. As with any research, care is taken not to reveal identifying information of any single organization or individual. These considerations are given some greater focus in this study due to market concentration in the U.S. dairy industry, i.e. large market shares held by a small number of firms. Therefore not only is the name of the organization not revealed neither is size of the cooperative. Focus is on dairy cooperative members located in the northwest U.S.

There are several other methodological positions taken in the paper that require some brief clarification, given the qualitative nature of the work:

1) A personal “standpoint epistemology” (Ryan 2012; Griffin 2009; and Rolin 2009) and “autoethnology” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) are utilized as interpretive guides to the work. “Standpoint epistemology” involves a study approach that highlights societal positions of power and powerlessness existent within a particular socio-economic and political context. Autoethnology extends that learning by placing oneself as the author, and as one fits, within the context. This author grew up in a dairy farming area of up-state New York in a village of 80 people surrounded by dairy farms; himself

embedded within multiple kinship-led, family-based dairy farms. Membership in dairy cooperatives was the predominant form of milk assembly, processing, and marketing in the area. Historically the predominant farm organization in the region had been a small-scale kinship structure, though existing in a context of progressive industrialization and globalization. These latter two processes (among others) have advanced scale to such a degree as to drive multiple farm losses and farm displacements, and to contribute to a sense of powerlessness among farmers faced with such macro socio-economic processes (see Schafft and Brown (2019; *Farms, Farmers and Farming in Contemporary Rural Society*). This author pulls from these experiences and particularly in writing the “Summarizing Tableau” to follow in Part III of the report.

2) As mentioned the work is also a qualitative analysis. “Qualitative research... seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena as recorded from the subjects’ natural setting. It focuses on social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of people (UTA 2022, p 1)”.

3) Given the qualitative nature of the work, the mode of exposition is in sentence-narrative form, following the research traditions of “interpretive sociology” and Kohutian psychology i.e. “putting oneself in the shoes of another to assume the other’s perspective” (Segal 2018, p. 3; Auchincloss and Samberg 2012; Macionis and Gerber 2010). However the work extends the Gitterman and Germain focus from micro understandings of stress to one of social empathy; or as Segal (p. 7) comments, blending understandings of the feelings and actions of others [on an individual plane] with insights derived from a [macro socio-economic] historical position. Rolin (2009, p. 224) refers to this broadening as “moving from an individual social experience toward a collective social experience.”

The report is ultimately concerned with the stress of members within a cooperative, as impacting cooperative solidarity—i.e. or how strongly members feel connected to each other and to the larger organization generally. However the study extends beyond the Gitterman and Germain (2021) model, moving from an understanding of “stress” as an individual experience to one more fully appreciative of the collective experiences of problematic solidarity as existent in a cooperative. Recommendations are offered in the final section as derived from the various member comments for resolving the various solidarity challenges.

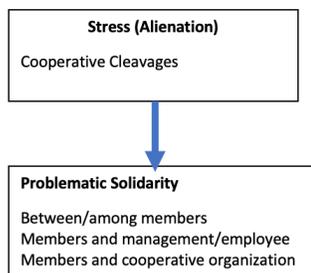
## PART II: WRITTEN COMMENTS

Part II, presents a selection of respondent comments representing the categories suggestive from the analytic model.

### Problematic Solidarity

Multiple respondents manifested an awareness of fundamental differences among different groupings of the membership, and between members as a collective and the larger business organization. These differences are particularly problematic when members of one group are perceived as having advantages over another group. This makes awareness of more general mutual interests within the cooperative more difficult to maintain.

Figure 2: Problematic Solidarity (Alienation)



**Lack of Solidarity Between Members as a Group and Management/Employees:** There were several differences between cooperative members as a group and management and employees. These differences included perceived distinctions in 1) economic class 2) positions in the cooperative organization and 3) how respectively members and management /employees differed in their expectations of what the cooperative should be doing or not doing.

For example, members commented on economic class and organizational position:

They sure have some nice jobs, but come out to the farm, rather than being on the golf course, I'm pretty sure they have some nice padded retirements. We're going broke out here, while management makes a big paycheck. We can't afford to feed our cows; prices are so low. Oh, we see the fancy brochures, but we can't pay our bills. Most of them [management] have no idea of how to milk a cow. They don't seem to be able to appreciate what it's like on the farm, dealing with the elements, getting up at 4 AM every day of the week with no vacations or paid days off. There seems to

be a lack of appreciation of the farmer-member. We never hear anything about pride in the membership. Fieldpersons are impatient, general employees are sometimes dismissive, some are clueless. Haulers can be difficult.

We need managers and employees who can be our advocates, not forgetting what a co-op is, and not ordering us around, telling us what to do. It is our thoughts that should matter. They are suppose to work for us. Stop acting like policemen. They don't seem to know what a cooperative is and who is responsible to whom. Maybe they should come out here and run the farm. Let's see how they do.

The members understand that the cooperative has been organized to meet member needs. Yet, it seems to members that the organization works for the hired personnel. Members experience themselves as subordinated to management and employees.

Management forgets the farmer is the reason for the cooperative. It's supposed to make a profit to distribute to members, not just make a profit. And they're too preoccupied with "big business" and not the farmers.

Ultimately members recorded disappointment with the level of support coming from cooperative management and employees generally.

**Lack of Solidarity Between and Among Members:** Problematic solidarity is manifest not only between the membership and management/employees, but also among members themselves., e.g. "There are some bad apples among the membership." This shows up particularly between different categories of members in the context of perceived fairness.

Large farm operators are favored over smaller ones. Smaller producers need to be listened to more, a lot of big producers are not efficient. The cooperative just doesn't listen to the smaller farmer. And what's the deal on Grade A milk producers subsidizing Grade B milk producers. Grade B milk producers subsidize Grade A producers. There is a split between large and small producers.

**Lack of Solidarity Between Members and the Board of Directors:** Member interests are supposedly represented by elected officers and particularly by a board of directors. However themes come through in these comments that the board is not always seen in a positive light.

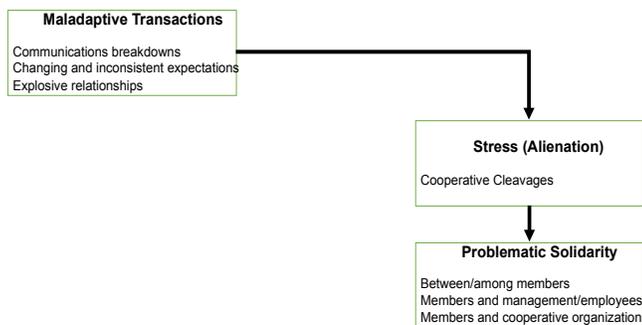
We never see our director. Membership needs to be involved more but the board is very condescending. Who wants to come to meetings headed by that. They don't pay much attention to the general membership and its only big dairy producers who get elected. They seem to be holding an office just for their own interests.

An important instrument to bring members in, to seek to minimize the distance between members and the organization is a representative system. Representatives become the members' voice. However the above comments strongly suggest representatives have not done this well. This has been accompanied with distancing comments among members in relationship to size of farm (small versus large) and tensions between Grade A and Grade B milk producers.

**Maladaptive Transactions: Within the Organization**

Maladaptive transactions refer to exchanges (or their absence) that occur along links that tie members together, and between members and the organization. They are considered maladaptive if they work against member and organizational purposes and organizational continuation. Examples of these disruptions include (among others): 1) blocks in communications, 2) changing and inconsistent expectations, and 3) exploitive relationships. Each can compromise solidity and ultimately the entire integrity of the organization.

Figure 3: Maladaptive Transactions



**Communication Breakdowns:** Members indicated several areas where there have been breaks, absences, and/or mismanagement in communications. These communication breakdowns, and the resultant losses of information, can then create a sense of member disconnection or dis-embedment. Members do not understand the organization nor themselves as a part of it.

For example, they commented:

Need information on what the goals of the organization are, and what progress is being made to achieve them. [Remember you work for us.] Policies need to be explained in detail. We're not being informed about major capital purchases. It's right in the bylaws. Where did the truck company come from.?

For Pete's sake, I don't understand how my milk price in my check is determined. We need "clear" information on component pricing, deductions, tests. How the heck can we manage our dairies if we don't know what we're being paid for? It's our paycheck please tell us what we're being paid for. And we're not being notified about milk quality issues. This needs to come in a timely fashion. It's frequently late and not always accurate. Where is my fieldman?

Tell it like it is. Don't sugar coat it. I need to be informed about what's going on that will affect my farm directly. All this other drama is not necessary.

These communication-breaks leave members disconnected from the organization. Particularly problematic, farmers know certain criteria are used to evaluate their milk, but at times are not clear on exactly how those criteria are used, how to match production to the criteria, and ultimately how their hard labor relates to monetary rewards. Such uncertainties generate frustration and stress.

The communication break-downs themselves--not being informed about the details of policy for example--will challenge a sense of connection to the organization and contribute to a sense of alienation among the members. However, and more implicit with this set of comments, there continues to be an awareness that the cooperative is to be working for the members—but, "for Pete sakes, it doesn't seem to be"--further contributing to alienation and a lack of solidarity.

**Changing and Inconsistent Expectations:** Cooperatives promise predictability to members and organizational influence. When changes occur without members' knowledge or consultation, member perception of the cooperative as being "their organization" is tested. Questions begin to emerge concerning whose interest the cooperative serves.

In response to the cooperative sending out a manual to members with suggestions and policies on husbandry, labor relations and environmental issues, some members felt insulted that management was instructing them on areas of expertise that management and employees knew very little about.

For example:

If we did not treat our cows properly we would quickly be out of business.

If our employees did not treat the cows right they would not be here.

If we did not take care of our land and water we would not be farmers very long.

If we did not produce a quality product we would be out of business.

Animal husbandry, environmental mandates, labor regulation, historically have been in the farmer domain of decision making. As larger social costs have become more obvious in these areas, there has also been more regulation. Independent minded farmers can then chafe at this regulation:

We need management/employees to be producers' advocates not policemen. Maybe you don't know it, but we don't like being ordered to do things, especially by people who have never even milked a cow in their entire life.

Compensation: Other inconsistencies tend to be based in contextual understanding of cooperatives. For example, typically members understand that they own the cooperative, and that it is organized for their use. "Management and employees work for member." It is very difficult for some member to understand that management/employees may have higher incomes than members or that their incomes do not fluctuate like member incomes. Hence, we hear comment such as:

Management should be paid in accordance with fluctuations in milk prices...when the farmer's pay goes up, so should management. When...farmers' pay goes down, so should managements. Then they would remember who they are working for. Cut Salaries and pay us more.

Further member comments suggest a lack of understanding of organizational complexity.

We own the business and can buy in bulk. Why do our supplies cost more? They should be a whole lot cheaper than they are.

The study cooperative predominantly functions to market farmers' milk though it also provides a limited supply function, e.g. dairy farming and cattle maintenance items. Cooperatives are businesses and in some ways are like any other business. They must compete in the marketplace and perform in a manner to assure their continuance. Smaller scale in supply provisioning generally translates to higher prices than larger scale more extensive firms. There is a confused expectation of what the cooperative can and cannot do.

Small versus Large Organization: Members also expect their cooperative to be a viable organization that continues to serve them through time. To remain viable, organizations sometimes have to change in ways members do not readily appreciate.

Acquisitions and mergers have been used by cooperatives to establish position and long-term competitiveness in the marketplace, to accommodate members, and to achieve better price and financial performance. Yet these tactics have resulted in cooperative structure and members experiences that conflict with their other expectations of the organization.

Many of us understand the importance of economic competition, when there's competition farmers have more choices on where to sell milk, it forces buyers to be more competitive and more efficient. Currently the market doesn't seem to work very well for the farmer. Some of this seems to be related to our cooperative acquiring other plants and becoming a big company.

Members' experiences in large cooperatives tend to contradict expectations of cooperatives as being small local and personal. However, for the organization's long-term survival, and the members' financial expectations, it must be competitive. As economies of scale come into play as a necessity of the market, size and complexity of the organization increase--frequently compromising the member-relational aspects of the organization. Relationships that might have been more personal in small organizations, become impersonal and formal in large ones. Members then complain of perceived insignificance.

The cooperative is too big. Our voice is like a drop in the ocean.

Members expect their cooperatives to perform financially, remain small, local, under their control and to continue functioning through time. Members generally do not like changes of increased size and the capitalization requirements that accompany these changes.

Hence, we hear comments such as:

Cut management pay and clean out the deadwood at headquarters. The co-op is too big.

Service Issues: There were a series of other service issues that suggest some confused expectations among the membership.

The lab does its job, but they are vague in what they want from the producer, we are suppose to test our own milk, but am I also responsible for my neighbor's testing? Huh? There is no consistency in who picks up the milk. Young member programs are fine, but I would rather that money be given to producers. All those programs turn into sales pitches anyway. There sure are a lot of notices for quality problems, but the concerns for quality don't extend to getting those notices to us early enough to do anything about it. And there's not much reward for compliance.

Consistency in service suggests reliability and possibly trust in the organization. Reliability itself builds member commitment and improves solidarity. When consistency is failing, members often remember this, commitment declines as does solidity. These declines then make commonality harder to recognize (Shockley-Zalabah and Morreale 2011).

### Exploitive Relationships

Exploitation generally refers to the selfish use of a person, place or thing, for one's own ends. Members commented that management/employees and member leadership had been acting in a manner to benefit themselves individually, at the expense of the larger membership. Whether these relationships are in fact exploitive is not clear, but the perception is enough to have a dissipative impact on solidarity. For example, some members felt the relationship within the organization was lop-sided and unfair and reported:

Every part of the dairy industry makes a higher profit than the farmer. What if we stop milking, where would they be then. All these fees and deductions feel like we are too

trusting and are being taken advantage of. We pay for marketing our product, then they say we should be out promoting our product. Didn't we just pay for that? We are not being paid for our butterfat we are supposed to be. What the heck is going on here? Cooperative policies change depending on how competitive an area is. High competition can mean more lenient pay back demands on debt. Cooperative policies shift whether there is competition in the area or not, and whose share of debt has to be paid and what doesn't have to be paid.

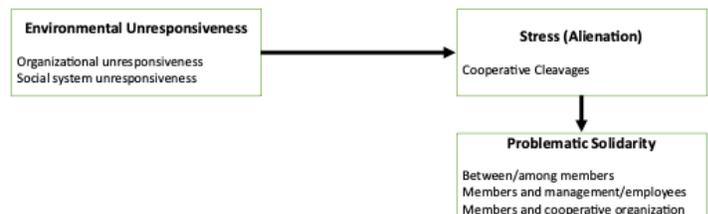
When members perceive these kinds of behaviors, resentment and lack of commitment and trust frequently follow.

### Summary of Maladaptive Transactions

Communication breakdowns, unfulfilled and / or contradictory expectations, perceived and/or actual exploitive relationships can fracture member solidarity within an organization. These malfunctions can then threaten the cooperative's ability to provide member service through time. If service provision fails, or expectations of service fail, then members question the reason for their participation in the organization.

**Environmental Unresponsiveness:** Members can help maintain an organization and cope with change when their environments provide flows of resources, materials and information that meet needs. Members struggle when these supports are missing and various needs go unmet (Gitterman and Germain 2008). Member comments addressed two levels of unresponsiveness: 1) organizational unresponsiveness and 2) larger societal unresponsiveness.

Figure 4: Environmental Unresponsiveness



### Organizational Unresponsiveness

Members need the dairy cooperative to 1) accept all of their milk production, 2) provide a guaranteed market, 3) pay them the highest possible price, 4) sell the milk and/or milk products in the larger marketplace for the highest possible price, and 5)

provide various services and materials that support and help maintain the farm operation and milk production.

Most of the previous comments presented in this report could be characterized as reactions to non-responsiveness. This section looks more directly at very concrete cooperative purposes. It presents farmer comments on non-responsiveness in the direct farmer business environment.

**Milk Surplus, Low Prices, Poor Marketing and Milk Quality Issues:**

We are trying to survive out here. There needs to be more benefit for the producer. The cooperative should be paying the best price and they haven't been. What to do with surplus milk? There's not good marketing. Too much emphasis on just processing milk rather than finding a home for the product. More training is needed on milk quality issues. Better marketing with high quality product would get more value for the customer and better prices for the farmer. We'll get better prices for higher quality milk. It all comes down to the cooperative making a premium for quality product. And better branding.

**Compensating the Farmer / Financing the Cooperative:**

We need to keep what we've got in our milk checks, and what we are entitled to. How about paying us for butterfat like you're suppose to. If money is going to be retained from our milk checks for construction, we should receive preferred stock in return. Will we be getting a return on our investment. The cooperative should budget better rather than telling us to budget better. The cooperative should be able to generate enough profit to update and fund new construction without taking more dollars from the producer's paycheck. We are trying to survive out here.

**Fieldpersons:** The fieldperson's role is to help members acquire resources, knowledge, and skills to function successfully as a dairy producer and cooperative member. Their availability is key. Members find their absence particularly troublesome:

Where is my field rep. Field reps frequently aren't available when we need them. We don't see them often enough. Some don't come even after we call. And it means more than just showing up. They should have some real interest in helping to improve the farm business. And they should know the industry in and out, and they don't.

### **Environmental Non-responsiveness at the Social System**

**Level:** The larger environment within which dairy farmers function has been difficult for members at best. These difficulties include issues around:

**Cost-price squeeze:**

We work long, hard hours, produce a great product, and keep getting paid less and less while costs keep going up--some term a cost price squeeze. We used to think we were the backbone of the country. Now we're not so sure. My father got more when he started than we do now. We're old now and owe more than when we started.

There is no profit. We can't stay in production if costs are higher than returns. We would like an agricultural where we could pay off our debts and still have some free time. Farmers are getting gouged all over the places, high input costs and low milk prices, and then the cooperative turns around and takes retains out of our checks, so they can expand while we go out of business.

**Production treadmill:** Producers question the progressive adoption of technologies to improve returns. Some suggest technologies have made matters worse:

Farmers are constantly being forced to use and pay for more and more technology to become more efficient. But, we are rewarded with lower prices that come with greater surpluses.

We came into farming not expecting to get rich, but to continue the lifestyle in which we were raised. We need a fair and equitable price. Other workers get a minimum wage. We think the powers that could figure a way for farmers to be paid a fair price that would cover expenses and provide a decent living We will be out of business in five years.

**Policy Issues, Regulation, and Farm Survival:**

There are all sorts of problems at the regional and national level that affect farmers, labor reform, trade, guest worker program and immigration, taxes, health insurance, milk prices, environmental regulation, water, water rights, Farm Labor Association, WAFLA, WSFB, Flood Control District.

If prices don't improve soon, and regulation burdens continue to eat us up, we'll have to just quit dairying.

Cooperatives need to engage in policy making to determine

some better ways to keep farmers in business to be advocate for farmers, recognize farmers are ethical, but also have to stay in business. What do we do when we have too much milk for the market to manage?

When it comes to labor and unemployment practices and all these other practices, all the cooperatives should be concerned about is staying within the law. Producers have some ideas about what is the right thing to do and will do it.

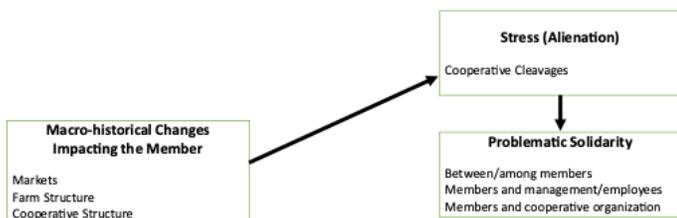
**Summary of Unresponsive Environments**

While many farmers have survived, many others have not. Stress and frustration are likely high for surviving farmers who witness these displacements, as they themselves seek to continue farming. Cooperatives emerged to help solve various farmer difficulties. However cooperatives are limited in what they can do as larger historic changes occur. To the extent larger macro forces are beyond cooperative ability to affect change, solidarity among members and between members and the organization suffer.

**Macro-historical Changes Impacting Members**

The historical market conditions facing dairy producers in part stems from the characteristics of milk and milk production itself (Manchester 1983, Baily 1997, Schwarzweller and Davidson 2000).

Figure 5: Macro-historical Changes Affecting Members



The conditions of perishability, variability in supply and demand, production growth, and surpluses place the individual farmer at a severe disadvantage in the marketplace. Proprietary processors and manufacturers often hold an advantage to dictate prices and refuse to accept producers’ milk (See figure 5).

Farmers have attempted to offset these market disadvantages by forming dairy cooperatives. In so doing, they assumed responsibility for resolving many fundamental problems of

marketing milk. This included balancing the supply of milk—which varies seasonally and daily—to meet demand.

Reserves had to be made available to meet peak demands. Outlets for market excesses above slack demand periods were needed. Demand/supply balancing functions within local markets and between related markets in close proximity were required. Surplus milk supplies were channeled into butter, powder, cheese, and specialty products to provide additional market outlets and to maximize milk’s ability to be stored and transported.

Large complex dairy cooperatives evolved to address these and other emergent problems. Large size, mergers, acquisitions, and decision-making predominantly based on obtaining efficiencies, savings, and economies of scale became a given of continued operations.

The main competitors of cooperatives, i.e. investor-oriented firms (IOFs), have seldom performed these market functions and services. Nor do they guarantee a market for producers’ milk as is done by cooperatives. While cooperatives perform these functions, they also incur costs in doing them. If these costs are not recovered in the marketplace, cooperatives will typically pass them back to member-producers in the form of lower milk pay prices. And lower milk pay prices, among other factors, can push farmers toward bankruptcy (Guth 1982).

**PART III: SUMMARIZING TABLEAU**

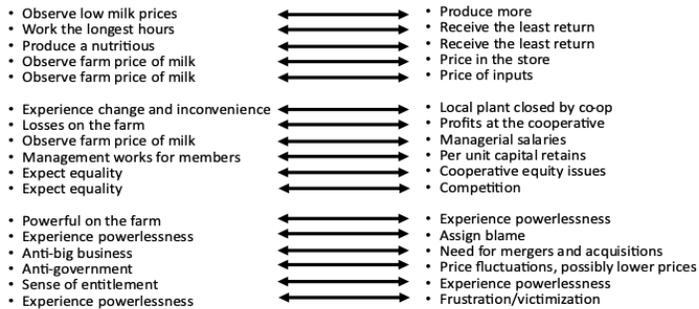
**Frustrations on the Farm, Losses in Solidarity**

From the individual members’ perspective, most member producers don’t operate at the level of the organization. They function on the farm. Their task is to produce at a level that maintains or enhances their lifestyle as dairy farmers. But many are caught in a treadmill bind. As individuals, the more they produce, the lower the price. The lower the price the smaller their profits or larger their debts. The smaller the return the greater the need to expand production.

The binding nature of this lifestyle frequently becomes reflected in farmer views and opinions about the world. And these views become manifest in comments as a series of oppositions between the farmer and other members, between the farmers and the cooperative, the farmer and the market, and the farmer and Government. Figure 6 presents these oppositions as synthesized from the earlier studies and as augmented from the 2018 study (following guides on

qualitative research from Merriam and Tisdell 2015; Josselson and Hammack 2020; Marshall and Rossman 1989).

Figure 6: Historical Synthesis, Summarizing Tableau



Central is the members’ individual and historic need to produce all they can at the best possible price, the cooperative’s guarantee to market all of their members’ production, and the market’s ability (or inability) to absorb the product.

When farmers receive low prices for milk they tend to behave rationally as individuals and either produce more milk to raise their incomes, try to find ways to reduce expenses, or direct their energies to some other more profitable outlet if possible. They often work long hours at least 6 days a week, to produce more for less expense. Herds are milked twice or three times a day, 7 days a week. To assure maximum returns, farmers incur considerable expense to produce a high quality and nutritious product. Yet, per unit prices remain low. Expenses, when and if covered, leave very little disposable income. Scale is increased, acreage and cows are added, machinery gets larger and more complicated, volume climbs and loans are secured to cover increased cost, but returns remain small.

Members see retail prices for milk in grocery stores and restaurant and wonder where does all the money go? Milk in a restaurant sells for more than \$3.00 a glass, but farmers may only get a nickel of that. Inputs prices increase 300 and 400 percent. Yet, producers’ milk prices rise slightly, stay stable, or decline. If the plant they regularly sent milk to has closed, they must ship their product to more distant locations. Many may feel attached to their local cooperative, and are disappointed seeing it go.

As members of a cooperative, certain expectations are set up concerning members’ influence and treatment because of their ownership interest: Cooperative principles suggest members

rights of control/influence and equal treatment. Yet, while farmers go broke or nearly so the cooperative often continues to make money. Managers work for the producer-owners yet have much higher and more stable salaries. Farmers are told they are being paid a certain price, but the cooperative retains some of it for several years to sustain the business.

Many expect to have a strictly held equal treatment but find different farmers receiving different prices depending on where they live, how much milk they produce, and what their milk contains. These experiences counter their hard work on the farm and some of their expectation of cooperatives. Many feel they give a great deal for little return.

On the farm, members are in a position of power. If a job needs to be done they do it. As one farmer said, they’re out in the elements, have huge jobs to do, and quietly do them. However, when confronted with the market, the individual is as powerless off the farm as he/she is powerful on it.

In a context of seemingly giving everything and receiving little—while working effectively—a human tendency is to assign blame to themselves and to others. When problems show up on the farm, they are generally solved, even if it takes a lot of long hard work (and it generally does). If problems off the farm are not being solved (and farmers feel certain they are not because prices are so low) it is considered due to negligence or exploitation.

From this setting, issues of equality and lack of perceived fairness become more focused. Grade A producers see themselves as subsidizing Grade B producers and vice versa. Large and small volume producers look at one another in similar fashion. Others plead for help to preserve the family farm. Fingers are pointed to management and salaries, with a call to cut them and distribute more money to members. Directors’ competence is questioned. Term limits are suggested.

As a collective, cooperatives are an offset to individual powerlessness. Cooperatives have merged, made acquisitions, innovated products, and penetrated markets. Yet, “the” cooperative can be considered too large, a big business too far from the farm, and monopolistic in its tendencies. It’s sometimes seen as eliminating important local competition and leaving the farmer with few or no alternatives. While all members may benefit locally from a merger or acquisition or from market functions performed, individual members may

experience lower prices and less service. What might have happened had a merger not occurred is difficult to assess, particularly when bills are coming due.

Opposition to big business is sometimes matched with anti-big Government. Government is seen as distant, meddling and controlling, and doing too little or not enough. Farmers, ready to solve their own problems, may call for Government exclusion from problem solving or different involvement from what currently exists. As with mergers, it is difficult to know precisely what the current situation would be like without Government programs. But, from within current policy and current circumstances, some members see them as inadequate and call for change.

Conceiving of themselves as the “backbone” of the economy and center to its health, members sometimes feel mistrustful and personally victimized within what has become a national and global economy, an economy over which they have little to no influence individually. These conditions have at times required mergers and consolidations by a distant, “big business” cooperative.

Out of this frustrating and double binding experience, solidarity can collapse and members may write:

Get rid of the CEO. Large producers are getting away with sending contaminated milk. Many of you have never worked on a farm in your life, yet you continue to get high salaries. The government wants cheap food.

## CONCLUSION

This overview reflects a logic of frustration that exists among members. It presents the historical transitions that members have had to endure and adapt to. It is likely many members can relate to these scenarios at some time and in some way, particularly when things are not going well on the farm, and historically, they often aren't.

These comments suggest dairy cooperatives at a minimum, need to become more personalized in dealing with individual farmers. Understanding the historical drama of farm loss—as members witness bankruptcies and sellouts of relatives and neighbors, and as they experience their own solvency problems—should help provide a context to any member comment. Cooperative personnel and representatives

can then use this understanding as they work within their relationships with members.

Cooperative leaders, more than anyone else, need to provide open channels for members to express their needs and concerns.

Ultimately, the cooperative organization must emphasize the several mutual interests of dairy farmers. When dairy farmers act collectively through their cooperative, they can realize at least some of their respective individual interests. But more importantly, when they act together they build their collective strength as dairy farmers.

To make the cooperative work for them, they must continue to participate and involve themselves with their dairy farmer neighbors, and with their organization. Being heard is a start, both for the member and the larger cooperative organization. In the last analysis, managers, employees, and elected officers must constantly remember the simple but profound fact that the cooperative is the members' organization.

The final part of this paper presents a list of recommendations codified directly from member comments or implied by their comments. These recommendations are keyed to the various aspects of the Life Model as presented previously in the paper from the Gitterman and Germain work.

## PART IV: RECOMMENDATIONS

Maladaptive transactions—communication breakdowns, inconsistent expectations, exploitive relationships and unresponsiveness, both in the organizational and larger environment, contribute to member stress and can weaken cooperative solidarity. Perhaps one of the best vehicles in responding to member complaints and dissatisfaction is to listen. The following recommendations come directly from members or are implied by their comments—from a list of 50 in original technical assistance projects.

### Maladaptive Transactions

#### Communications Breakdowns:

Let member know they are heard by discovering and eliminating barriers, and/or improving the communications/listening skills of those relating directly with members such as fieldpersons, directors, haulers, and member representatives.

Arrange meetings at convenient times for the most members. Encourage broader participation by member in local offices. Provide for broader recognition of members doing important jobs for dairy farmers and the cooperative. Mitigate insider/outsider feelings of some member with recognitions and participation.

Provide for regular contact between members and the leadership. If each elected representative would visit 1-2 farmers a month, every month, to listen to on-farm problems, felt connection to the cooperative, both for the representative and the farmer, could be largely improved.

### **Changing and Inconsistent Expectations:**

Help members understand how cooperatives enable farmers to act collectively but in the context of an increasingly complex and globalized economy.

Educate members to the reality that while the cooperative needs to be healthy financially, even though individual members may be losing money. Explain the costs of guaranteeing a market and providing market functions and other benefits of appropriate capitalization.

Educate members to the reality of the market for hired management and the market for milk. Managerial compensation must be sufficient to attract and retain expertise capable of managing a large complex organization. Current levels of managerial compensation are well below those found in investor-oriented firms. Milk price determinants are national and global.

### **Exploitive Relationships and Mistrust:**

Take complaints of exploitation seriously and investigate them, make corrections if needed, and follow up with complainant.

Develop more contacts between management and members, so each can become familiar with and learn to trust the other.

Publish management and employee profiles that highlight agricultural and rural backgrounds to help reduce a sense of difference and improve familiarity and trust.

Encourage corporate-level management to attend local meetings even if on an infrequent but regular basis, making it clear management wants member input.

### **Maladaptive Transactions including communication breakdowns, inconsistent expectations, perceived exploitive relationships:**

Include in education agendas and materials that management realizes: 1) members supply the milk, 2) that their own jobs at the cooperative depend on the dairy farmers ability to produce milk from their herds, 3) that they understand that times are difficult for dairy farmers, and 4) that they realize they work for the member-owners.

Communicate and educate members on how decision on mergers, consolidations, or closing of "local" plants are reached. Competition not only keeps the cooperative "on it's toes" but also sets standards on its effectiveness to obtain the best price for members. Clarify the long-run advantages of a continued guaranteed market for farmers as part of a stable and reliable organization.

Educate members on the economic and market realities behind cooperative pricing policies, with particularly focus given to tradeoffs between equity and equality. Explain how farmers across the road from each other could be getting different prices (Are big farmer favored over smaller farms or the reverse? Are Grade A producers favored over Grade B producers or the reverse, etc.?).

### **Unresponsiveness of the Environment**

#### **Unresponsiveness of the Cooperative Organization:**

Advise members about the various price incentives they are receiving. Define clearly the assessments, bonuses and penalties. Explain why there has been a shift away from butterfat and toward protein, and links between bonuses and penalties. Review all items on milk checks.

Communicate to members the basis for differences between retail prices and the farm prices. Explain what happens to the money between the retail prices and the price on the farm. Tie-in the cooperative's work on "value-added products and product innovation, and mergers.

Investigate the speed with which test results are made available to the farmers. Could alternatives get results to members quicker? Investigate the reliability of all tests and reassure members when necessary, that corrections have been made or continued accuracy will occur.

**Unresponsiveness of the Larger Environment:**

Members had definite suggestions on how the larger environment might become more responsive to their needs. These comments were directed toward cooperatives working with each other, the dairy industry, government, and national policy.

**Cooperation among cooperatives:** Interests of farmers might be better served by cooperating more with other cooperatives.

We might be able to eliminate some of the middle costs and become more efficient. That savings could then be passed back to us, the members. We could do something about the low prices if cooperatives would cooperate with one another...Get supply down and prices up. Set up our own supply control program.

**Dairy industry:**

Survival depends on: 1) bargaining with proprietary firms for a fair price, 2) controlling the surplus of milk if and when there is one, 3) educating the customers about what goes into producing milk and milk's purity quality and 4) working with retail outlets including restaurants to promote milk.

**Government:** Comments concerning government involvement ranged from insisting total government withdrawal to continued involvement.

We need sales. The dairy industry can handle its own problems. If government was out, we would probably still need it to sell surpluses at least on the world market, maybe more, even at a loss if need be. We need production controls, maybe cooperatives could do them. Get back to supply and demand, but only if the rest of the world follows suit. Even Steven, otherwise no. We need continued involvement of Uncle Sam.

**Policy/National:**

Give priority to the United States and in particular family farms and family farmers. Reduce taxes, raise farm product prices and lower interest rates for farmers. We need a business limit that allows small businesses and family size farms to cover expenses and make a reasonable profit. Reduce or abolish the capital gains tax. This would let older farmers retire with a decent living wage.

Give greater emphasis keeping farmers in business as the most important thing, followed by expanding volumes and reducing unit costs.

**ADDENDUM: FARMERS MENTAL HEALTH AND RESOURCES**

There were no written comments that suggested comprehensive indicators of depression or anxiety, e.g. feelings of sadness and/or aloneness, i.e. "letting family members down," reports of panic attacks or that they were "unable to go on in life." However, feelings of powerlessness, intense frustration, and a sense of victimization were embedded in the narratives and are suggestive of mental health struggles. In more comprehensive and focused mental health studies, farmers and farm managers have been found to have higher rates of depression, anxiety, as well as suicidality, when compared to non-farmers--this being particularly the case for animal and dairy farmers (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.).

While not a purpose of this study explicitly, a list of possible mental health resources are provided below for agriculture and farming communities:

[AgriStress HelpLine](#): 833-897-2474 a free 24 hour 7 days a week hotline.

[The Tema Foundation webpage: Canadian Mental Health Hotlines](#) — The Tema Foundation

[Mental health resources for farmers](#) | ontario.ca

Webpage [Stress, anxiety, depression, and resilience in Canadian farmers](#) | Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology (springer.com)

[Mental Health Resource Hub - NATIONAL CENTER FOR FARMWORKER HEALTH](#) (ncfh.org)

[National Farmers Union's website Farm Crisis Center](#) "Time are Tough: We're here to help."

[American Farm Bureau Federation's Farm State of Mind](#) "Farm State of Mind Resource Guide."

Farm Aid: [Why Farmers Face Unique Threats from Stress](#).

North Dakota State University Extension website  
[Understanding Key Stresses in Farming and Ranching](#)

National Council on Family Relations' [Farm Family Stressors: Private Problems, Public Issue](#)

American Psychological Association: [Farmer Stress](#)

[Mental health resources for farmers and ranchers](#)  
(agriculture.com)

[Farm Safety and Health: Managing Stress](#), North Dakota State University Extension

[Health & Farm Vitality](#), University of Delaware Cooperative Extension and University of Maryland Extension

[Helping Farmers Cope with Stress](#), University of Maine Cooperative Extension

[Managing Stress During Tough Times](#), Colorado State University Extension

[The Personal Nature of Agriculture: Men Seeking Help](#), University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service

[Production Agriculture and Stress, Farm & Ranch eXtension in Safety and Health \(FReSH\) Community of Practice](#)

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