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1971

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Victor Ligouri
Virginia Institute of Marine Science

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Some Sociological Perspectives on the Formation and Operation of
Commercial Fishery Cooperatives

Victor A. Liguori

November 24, 1971

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FISHERY COOPERATIVES - A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Commercial Fishery Cooperatives

This report is intended to present a range of sociological perspectives: problems, questions pertaining to the formation and operation of cooperatives for and by commercial fishermen. It is a preliminary report which does not duplicate those discussions in publications specifically concerned with cooperatives (included in the selected bibliography), but rather offers themes and generalizations which I hope will prove useful, subject to criticism and discussion with staff members of VIMS. The first part of the report concerns planning the formation of a cooperative, with emphasis upon problems which have been encountered elsewhere.

PROBLEM: Anti-cooperation Value and Behavior Patterns

1. Exploitation, rather than management/cooperation orientation toward seafood resources.

(Fishery resources are there to be taken. If I don't get them, then the next man will. To sit idly and let him gain when you could be out working too, is foolish.

2. The deeply internalized belief that fishermen's personalities are intrinsically in opposition to cooperation. (See Liguori, pp. 300-301)

SUGGESTION:

In order to profitably understand this matter, I suggest study of the incentives crucial to the maintenance of commitment to commercial fishing.

- A. money (including the importance of the shares system)

The dramatic times, the big catches, often bring failure to remember financial and morale problems of the recent past and the predictable future.

QUESTION: To whom are the various fishermen selling now? How stable are his selling arrangements? Does he sell to more than one dealer?

Donald White reports that one of the two major causes for failure of coops is "the refusal of fishermen to discontinue selling their own fish."

(White p. 45)

B. the role of uncertainty (See Liguori p. 216)

Tunstall underlines the attraction of the gamble of each trip, and of making it big on his own to the typical fisherman. Thus he is prepared to accept the traditional costs: harsh working conditions, long hours, unfair if indirect control by those in positions of power. (Tunstall p. 245)

Fishermen repeatedly stress the fact that high morale they enjoy at sea when they are producing well becomes instantly undermined the moment they reach shore to learn of disadvantageous prices they will receive. Many dealers do not inform fishermen of prices even then, but rather record volume, then pack and ship, subtract expenses and pre-defined profit and then set the price per pound. Fishermen thus learn of the value of their catch a week or more after it leaves their hands.

I have come to understand that fishermen do indeed value uncertainty: the gamble on the water against seafood resources and the physical environments. The hope of a big catch is often what sustains their commitment. Uncertainty on land (What price will the dealer give us today?) is anything but an incentive, and planners of a fishery cooperative should take this fact into account.

SUGGESTION: Stress to commercial fishermen and their women the stability producing advantages of cooperatives.

Stress stability in the payment of earnings and working hours for women as well as for the fishermen themselves. Improved working conditions for women will interest the many wives and sisters of fishermen working in ancillary occupations.

Stress effect of stabilized earnings upon family life.

C. Independence

Some see commercial fishermen as the last of the ingrained individualists, and their insistence on independent labor as an insurmountable barrier

to sustained cooperation (Liguori, p. 300 ff).

White: "The fishermen are highly individualistic, short-run in outlook, and, in a sense, crisis-minded. The average fisherman has a powerful sense of self-reliance. He is not easy to arouse unless the situation is really tough."

Captain John Lowrey:

"Victor, watch those fish (menhaden). In a minute they're going to do something fishermen can't do — get together!"

PROBLEM: Getting fishermen such as those discussed by White above to enter into and sustain cooperative relationships. The crisis-minded point is very important indeed.

SUGGESTION: Untangle the important variables which mesh to form the syndrome of independence.

INDEPENDENT WORKER I:

In American-born as well as European-born commercial fishermen, strong approximations of the Protestant Ethic have been often deeply internalized. Work is regarded as an end in itself; one should never sit around idly when health, weather and gear permit fishing. He often exhibits continuous effort in several different technologies. At least one other type of "independent worker" (Tunstall p. 245; Liguori, p. 220) should be distinguished. This is the man who wishes not, or cannot, work for an employer. He finds it difficult to work under rules imposed by others. Work record typically much more unstable than Independent Worker I.

Interestingly, both independent types have shown opposition to minor but direct control through abiding by the rules of a coop, yet exhibit a willingness to fatalistically accept control by the fish dealer and that obscure force called the market. The desire expressed by the fishermen is to be left alone to work as they please as they fatalistically express their inability to understand or affect the Market.

The independence syndrome becomes even more problematic to the formation of cooperatives when fishing is highly competitive and one finds a very wide range of earnings among fishermen.

SUGGESTION: Indicate to fishermen the costs of their very weak sense of unity (recognizing, of course, enduring forces which encourage fragmentation).

D. Habit (How deeply ingrained are a fisherman's behavior patterns?)

N.B. RECOGNIZE THROUGHOUT THE COMMERCIAL FISHING INDUSTRY THE PROFOUND

UNWILLINGNESS OR PERCEIVED INABILITY FOR INDIVIDUAL FISHERMEN TO
INITIATE ACTION (Liguori p. 229)

- D. Job security (Liguori p. 222 ff)
- E. Formal education. Work with the broader perspectives of some fishermen to document the success of cooperatives operating elsewhere, to reveal the unfair practices of monopolistic fish dealers, etc.
- F. Minority group status

Does minority group status have anything to do with why some men fish? Recognize the impact of inter-ethnic group cohesion or antagonism on the formation and operation of cooperatives.
INVESTIGATE RELATIONSHIPS: DO not TAKE MUCH FOR GRANTED.

One might assume, for example, that it is simple to organize within an ethnic group perceived as "clannish." In fact, jealousy, not cohesion, may characterize relationships within the group.

Question: What implications for fishermen-dealer relationships can minority group status reveal?

For example, one might find a strong sense of loyalty in some fishermen toward a dealer. This loyalty might be based upon traditional and subjective, rather than rational economic, bases. This loyalty may be a great aid to dealers desiring to short-circuit incipient cooperative efforts.

- G. Age
- H. Patterns of vessel and gear ownership.

What percentage of boats and gear is owned by non-fishermen?

Are there strings attached to such ownership?

The following problems are frequently encountered in the actual operation of fishery cooperatives:

Problem: Fishermen often express cynicism about the honesty of others.

There will be distrust of the integrity of other fishermen to abide by the rules of the cooperative, perhaps expressed so:

"Why should I stop fishing or control the volume of my catch, when some of the others are sneaking off and selling all they catch whenever they can?"

White notes an interesting related problem (White, p.49)

"Often fishermen will fail to discipline individuals within the organization to assure conformity with the rules they themselves pass."

This is not a unique or mysterious circumstance. Often I find that those fishermen who so dislike being controlled also shrink away from controlling others if it is at all possible to do so.

Recognize this pervasive pattern:

Relationships in fishery systems are typically based upon person, rather than status, orientations. This is a very important generalization to those concerned with the formation of cooperatives.

Thus there is a profound belief that even if general efforts to unite fishermen into cooperation succeeded, the overall effort would fail because of the impossibility of gaining conformity from certain individuals in a port (manifesting in their personalities excessive stubbornness, indolence, alcoholism, dishonesty, unreliable work performances, etc.) In this fashion fishermen may conclude:

"So you see, it wouldn't work," unaware of evidence to the contrary.

Sometimes the cynicism toward the honesty of others takes the form of distrust of managers of the cooperative. This stems partly from differing definitions of the costs of commitment to commercial fishing (Liguori). (Tunstall notes fishermen seeing managers as "lazy, chair-bound bastards!" Tunstall p. 245)

I know of one cooperative which failed essentially because producers failed to

trust the ex-fisherman manager because he was no longer a fisherman. In his new capacity as manager he was believed to be working in his own interest, not affecting the desires of the fishermen.

SUGGESTION: Institutionalize an orderly change in statuses

Make the status of manager one of the desirable steps upward from the status of producer, rather than filling the position of secretary-treasurer with one individual or another who is or happens not to be an ex-fisherman.

Stress to all concerned the limited rights and responsibilities of the various official positions of the cooperative.

Another manifestation of cynicism toward the honesty of others is typically expressed by fishermen toward fish wholesalers. This cynicism can work significantly to the advantage of cooperative organizers.

"Fishermen are often "positive that dealers are depriving them of a decent wage." (White p. 49) The belief is especially articulated when the two parties represent different ethnic or racial groups, but is found in almost all commercial fishery systems. The belief is not an entirely subjective perception:

Unfair control and a range of more or less patterned modes of cheating producers are no secrets to fishermen. Some antipathy toward dealers who make huge profits from the labors of fishermen stems from commitment by the latter to the labor theory of value. This explains some of the adamant opposition to fishing for wages.

SUGGESTION:

Explore the subjective evaluations of the fish dealer by fishermen in a variety of production/price situations.

SUGGESTION:

Communicate the fact to fishermen that the market is vastly more flexible than most fish dealers describe it to be. Small scale and extremely traditional in their operations, fish dealers who say there is no market are really saying:

"I have enough for now. The small number of buyers to whom I ship need no seafood right now."

Stress also the fact that a rational, rather than a traditional, manager, interested in new markets, might continuously locate buyers for some of that vast percentage of "unmarketable" fish most fishermen collect and often wastefully destroy.

PROBLEM: Fish dealers in a given area will try and have great ability to undermine infant cooperatives. White (p. 45) notes that dealer opposition is one of the two most important forces which tend to short-circuit cooperatives.

Gus _____ was approached by another dealer in Cape May.

"Gus, sell to me. I'll give you a better price."

The arrangement worked well for a trip or two, then the new dealer explained to Gus that he could buy no more fish. (He and his physical plant were threatened with destruction.)

When Gus came to the original wholesaler again he was told:

"Gus, you look sick. No good for a man to work sick. You rest, for, say, three weeks; then I think you'll feel more like working."

TASK: Defuse the fish dealer's ability to unlawfully disrupt or discourage those interested in working in cooperatives. It is important to align political, as well as economic, power behind the cooperative and to publicize this effectively; it is crucial place the persuasive prestige as well as power of the law on the side of the coop.

QUESTION: What is the extent of a fisherman's membership in voluntary organizations in general and industry-related voluntary organizations in particular? (see Liguori p. 263 ff)

How do the fishermen subjectively and operationally define cooperation? (see Liguori p. 300)

The problem here is the absence of a sense of traditional union membership.

NOTE PATTERN:

The criteria employed by fishermen for organizing reference groups outside of work are very particularistic, generally. Activities do not include "all those who are fishermen," but rather are drawn along lines of ethnicity, kinship or residence for example.

Fishermen often express their distaste for formally organized meetings.

"We don't have time for meetings."

"You can't waste no time sitting at no meeting when you got work to do."

Instrumental also in this approach is the tremendous pragmatism exhibited by most commercial fishermen; the result is impatience with anything which even appears as though it is a waste of time.

SUGGESTION: Work hard to have voluntary meetings instrumental, rather than expressive. Have prepared agenda for each meeting. Have an individual preside who can maintain order and still invite commentaries from those who believe themselves to be hopelessly inarticulate.

MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS:

From whom does the fisherman buy his gear and daily supplies? Does he define his buying relationships as favorable?

What are the patterns of mobility (long and short range) exhibited by the various captains in an area?

SUMMARY SUGGESTIONS:

Work with and from the basic value orientations of the fishermen.

- I. Independence can be seen as the ability to shape your own life, including limiting the control fish dealers exert over you. Be independent from them.

Stress that pay is still in terms of shares, but that earnings may be paid to fishermen and their families in a variety of different ways. Stress stability plus independence.

Note the widespread tendency among fishermen and their wives to discourage their sons from making a career of commercial fishing. Relate the advantages of cooperative membership to those depressing aspects of the industry which weigh heavily on parents' minds. Some of these conditions can change sufficiently to open up the possibility of sons choosing to profitably work on the water.

2. Stress the practicality of the idea and the organization of the cooperative:

Many fishermen do not realize that it can and does work, and will reject the idea simply because they do not know of its success anywhere. What is ⁱⁿ need of attention is not the concept of cooperation, but rather an extension of their awareness of national and international efforts at cooperation.

Try and convince the highliners and the bright young men whose fatalism is not so solidly built upon traditional, religious, regional or ethnic foundations.

MAKE CLEAR THE COSTS AND THE REWARDS of cooperative efforts.

Stress that coop membership has provided some fishermen with their first voluntary vacations and days off.

Indicate honestly which technological subsystems have had most and which have had least success with the concept of cooperatives in the United States.

Stress the certainty of improved quality of their seafood opening up new and more profitable markets.

Be continuously aware of factors which may undermine the trust of the

membership.

The most pervasive suggestion of this report is:

Point out to the commercial fishermen the centrality of their failure to cooperate with each other to so many of their specific recurring and occasional problems and troubles.