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FACTORS OF EXTENSION OFFICERS JOB BURNOUT AND COPING STRATEGIES IN NORTHERN LESOTHO

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Abstract

The demand for extension services has become more prevalent as the factors that drive the demand for these services are daunting and require a motivated work force. A simple random technique was used to select 120 extension agents from 328. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire (reliability coefficient of 0.85) and were analyzed with frequency counts, percentages one-way analysis of variance and multiple regressions. The result shows that Burnout symptoms manifest mostly as depression (48%), insomnia (40%), headaches (43%), and weight loss (44%). The study suggests that extension agents adopt various coping strategies such as maintaining a positive attitude, setting realistic goals, and maintaining a healthy relationship with their co-workers. It also suggests that young and dynamic extension agents should be groomed to face the challenges of working with burnout.

Keywords: Job, Burnout, Coping, Extension Officers

Introduction

Extension services help develop productive and resilient farming communities by helping them identify and improve their production systems. They also provide them with information on farming techniques and technologies (Van den Ban and Hawkins 1998). Through extension services, researchers provide information and educational programs that are designed to help people make informed decisions regarding their economic, social, and cultural well-being (Long and Sworzel, 2007). Knowledge and understanding the target population's conditions and characters are two key factors that can help a researcher in their work. The poor financing of

extension programs has been a recurring problem for many years (Adams 1984). This issue has caused extension agents and other employees to be overworked and unwilling to work.

Unfortunately, there are still areas where extension services are not being delivered effectively due to the high attrition rate of agents. Despite the efforts of researchers to improve the retention rate of extension agents, many of them still leave the profession prematurely (Strong and Harder, 2009). The degree to which people are satisfied at work has been the subject of enduring research interest. According to some studies, the reason why they are satisfied at their jobs is related to various factors such as productivity, turnover, and job burnout (Bedeian, 1993).

The increasing levels of stress and anxiety experienced by people working in human services has also caught the attention of researchers. Working conditions and circumstances have been noted to exert significant effects on other aspects of the workers lives (Ajayi and Anagenyi, 2001). The low number of extension agents working in a given area could lead to overworked employees. This could create stress and frustration among the agents and their clients (Kutilek et al., 2002). Due to the increasing number of clients and the responsibilities of their jobs, many extension agents have become overworked. This could affect their ability to cope with the stress and frustration (Kutilek, Conklin, and Gunderson 2002). This could lead to the development of processes that can cause extension agents to work too much and become too tired to perform their duties. A lot of stress and dissatisfaction can also cause a person to feel overwhelmed and depressed. This state of exhaustion is usually triggered by the excessive demands of a life style or workplace.

Job burnout refers to a prolonged response to stressful situations and interpersonal issues. It can also lead to the reduction of one's efficiency at work. Freudenberger (1980) identified burnout as a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship

that failed to produce the expected reward. Pines et al. (1981) state that burnout is characterized by physical depletion, by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, by emotional drain, and by the development of negative self-concept and negative attitudes toward work, life and other people.

The effects of working conditions on an employee's well-being can have grave consequences. In Oladele (2010), the study revealed that job burnout symptoms like depression, insomnia, headaches, weight loss or gain, inability to make decision, increased worry and low job performance were most common among extension agents in South Western Nigeria. Ogunlade et al. (2008) analyzed the symptoms of job burnout among extension agents in Kwara state, Nigeria. It revealed that they were experiencing low morale, exhaustion, and frustration. Nyssee et al. (2003) also found that high risk taking and weak organizational planning predispose employees to burnout.

Another factor that affects the well-being of workers is the role that they played in their previous jobs. Whippen et al. (2004) linked job burn-out to negative effects on the clients of their respondents. A person's psychological and physical health can also be affected by job burnout. According to Fetsch et al. (1997), burnout can be characterized as a state of depersonalization and exhaustion. Karen (2005) said that job dissatisfaction is caused by overwork. Riggs and Beus (1993) also suggest that agents should start identifying the factors that determine their satisfaction at work. Agents tend to enjoy their work if they can re-train their bodies to handle stressful situations. Adesope and Agumagu (2003) revealed that job stress is linked to work experience in a project in Nigeria.

Ohio, Igodan and Newcomb (1986), investigated the effects of job satisfaction on the levels of stress and dissatisfaction of workers. They discovered that the higher the satisfaction level, the

more likely the employees were to experience job burnout. In a study conducted in Colorado, researchers discovered that the factors that affected the well-being of extension agents were not related to their job title or gender (Kennington, 1988 and Asiabaka, 1991).

Despite these factors, many extension agents have developed strategies and methods to cope with the stress they experience. These include developing strategies to manage their psychological and behavioural responses to stressful situations (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Ultimately, the extent to which people experience stress depends on how they manage it. According to George and Jones (1999), problem-focused strategies can help people manage their stress. The conditions of working for extension agents in various countries have been the subject of various studies conducted by different authors (Oladele 2004, Banmeke and Ajayi 2005 and Akinsorotan 2007).

One of the most common reasons that extension agents leave their job is due to the stress and exhaustion they experience. Ezell (2003), study revealed that job stress increased turnover among Tennessee's workers. Despite the findings about the high levels of job dissatisfaction experienced by extension agents, a large number of them still continue working for the program. The terms of the work for extension agents have a significant impact on the performance of the workers. This study aimed to identify the factors that affected the job satisfaction of the agents in Northern Lesotho.

Methodology

The Department of Agriculture was established in 1935 to provide for the management of various agricultural activities in Lesotho. It was divided into three sectors: Soil Conservation, Crops, and Animal Health. In 1966, the Ministry of Agriculture was established with three divisions:

Livestock, Crops, and Conservation. These divisions were then expanded to include a region known as Northern Lesotho. The agriculture sector contributes to the overall development of the various districts in Lesotho. The high number of extension agents in the area made the study selection difficult. The study was carried out by interviewing 40 extension officers. A structured questionnaire was then created to collect data on various topics related to job burnout. A simple random sampling technique was used. A structured questionnaire was designed based related literature and objectives of the study and comprised 36 items categorized as physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms of job burnout. The other sections of the questionnaire included 30 items related to job burnout. The instrument was thoroughly vetted by experts from the Department of Agriculture. The questionnaire had a reliability coefficient of 0.92 using the split half technique.

Results

Table 1. Job burnout symptom experienced by extension officers.

Burnout symptoms	Mean	SD
Physical symptoms		
Depression	1.65	0.94
Insomnia	1.52	0.84
Headaches	1.60	0.81
Sexual dysfunction	1.65	0.80
Weight loss or gain	1.45	0.81
Gastrointestinal	1.40	0.74
Shortness of breath	1.17	0.59
Easy-Fatigability	1.40	0.67
Pain (unexplained origin)	1.30	0.68
Weakness	1.35	0.80
Eating disorder	1.10	0.77

Psychological symptoms		
Boredom	1.52	0.96
Reduced selfconcept	1.52	0.78
Rigidity to change	1.62	0.77
Loss of concern	1.60	0.92
Cynicism/negativism	1.87	0.82
Low morale	1.67	0.85
Loss of patience	1.72	0.87
Feelings of disgust	1.57	0.93
Frustration	1.67	0.88
Inability to make decision	1.62	0.80
Increased worry	1.35	0.83
Feeling of omniscient	1.37	0.86
Loss of charisma	1.42	0.84
Taking unusually high risks	1.37	0.80
Suspicion and Paranoia	1.55	0.81
Daily mood variation	1.52	0.90
Anger	1.65	0.92
Anxiety	1.50	0.90
Guilt	1.52	0.75
Hopelessness	1.67	0.88
Worthlessness	1.52	0.84
Behavioural symptoms		
Forgetfulness	1.60	0.84
Low job performance	1.32	0.88
Increased absenteeism	1.42	0.87

Increased drug use	1.47	0.87
Increased marital and family conflict	1.52	0.75
High alcohol use	1.57	0.78
Accident proness	1.75	0.80
Workaholics	1.60	0.67
Irritability	1.37	0.62
Withdrawal	1.67	0.88
Hallucination	1.35	0.92
Agitation	1.85	0.92

Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation on coping strategies by extension officers which were rated on a 2-point scale of True (2), and False (1). The actual mean was 1.5 due to the rating scale and a mean of 1.5 and above agree to use of such strategies, while a mean less than 1.5 denoted non-use of such strategy.

Table 2: Coping strategies extension officers use on job burnout

Coping strategies	Mean	SD
I develop a realistic picture of my self	2.42	0.71
I keep a positive attitude at all times	2.40	0.81
I set realistic goals for my self	2.35	0.92
I don't easily get worked up	2.45	0.67
I recognize the symptoms of stress and burnout	2.37	0.77
I take time to rest when necessary	2.35	0.86
I ask for help when it's needed	2.35	0.69
I maintain a healthy relationship with co-worker(s)	2.47	0.87
I develop a structural and personal support system	2.45	0.81
I maintain a healthy relationship with superior officer(s)	2.47	0.81
I retain hope	2.40	0.92
I am highly receptive to new ideas	2.27	0.90
I develop a detached concern for recipients of my efforts	2.42	0.71
When I am offered help I easily accept it	2.42	0.71
I maintain an active personal social life outside of work	2.50	0.71

I easily interpret the assignments given to me	2.42	0.93
I take time-outs when I need them	2.35	0.76
I am satisfied with my job	2.27	0.90
I am improving myself academically	2.27	0.98
I maintain a regimen of proper nutrition and physical exercise	2.07	0.88
I worry a lot about trivial issues	2.07	0.88
I develop a sense of organization involvement	2.30	0.85
I am very energetic	2.40	0.84
I am willing to accept counseling when I need it	2.22	0.86
I look out for materials relevant to my job	2.37	0.89
I develop self therapies (meditations, religious meetings and relaxation)	2.17	1.05
I am optimistic by nature	2.35	0.86
I accentuate the positive	2.22	0.99
I prioritize on how best to accomplish tasks through time management	2.10	0.95
I am always on the look out for better opportunities	2.22	0.94
I am into other ventures to supplement my pay	2.10	0.92

Discussion

Table 1 shows that out of the 44 job burnout symptoms, 29 of them were reported by extension officers. The most common symptoms were anger/negativism, accident proness, and loss of patience. Prominent symptoms among extension officers were cynicism/negativism (1.87) agitation (1.85) accident proness (1.75) and loss of patience (1.72). Oladele (2010) reported similar findings among extension agents in South Western Nigeria. Igodan and Newcomb (1986) investigated the prevalence of various job-related symptoms among Ohio State University extension agents. They found that the most common ones were fatigue, abdominal pain, and eating disorder. These are shortness of breath (1.17), easy fatigability (1.40), pain of unexplained origin (1.30), weakness (1.35) and eating disorder (1.10).

The results in Table 2 of the study revealed that many of the strategies utilized by extension officers in dealing with job burnout were above the cut-off mark. Some of these included maintaining a healthy social life outside of work, developing a personal support system, and maintaining a healthy relationship with their superiors. All the means for the coping strategies were above the cut-off point of 1.5. The most prominent coping strategies as indicated by extension officers were maintaining an active personal social life outside of work (2.50), maintaining healthy relationship with co-workers (2.47), development of structural and personal support system (2.45) and maintaining healthy relationship with superior officers (2.47).

Conclusion

The study revealed that many extension officers in South Africa's North West Province experienced job burnout due to various symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. The study revealed that the key factors that affected the well-being of extension officers were developing a self-realistic picture, maintaining hope, and developing a support system. The factors that affected job burnout were gender, education level, and the number of farmers employed in the area. The study provided insight into the factors that led to job burnout and how they can be managed.

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