A Pilot Study of Farmers' Career Commitment During COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis that implies significant challenges for most business sectors; agriculture is one of those. Farming is considered one of the most stressful occupations; additionally, the current pandemic added more stress to farmers' lives (Johansson, 2021). The higher levels of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety in farmers have negative consequences for the person itself and agriculture (Rudolphi et al., 2020). Increased stress levels are associated with severe occupational accidents, poor health, farming turnover intention, depression, and in more severe cases, farmers' suicide (Dudensing et al. l., 2017). Resilience is the "human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity" (Grotberg, 1997, p.13). It is a dynamic mode of interacting with events in the environment that are activated and nurtured in times of stress (Tait, 2008) wherein individuals display adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). In addition to resilience skills, career commitment is a critical component to grow in an agriculture pathway, helping farmers develop specialized skills and the power to persist in their jobs, even in challenging times (Mrayyan & Al-Faouri, 2008). A strong career commitment promotes strategies to maintain the job over time, self-sacrifice for the career, and accommodating to hard times rather than withdrawing from it. We found limited studies that explore the relationships between farmers' stress, stress resilience, and career commitment. This study highlights relevant points for future research and application for Extension work.

Conceptual framework

Career commitment is characterized by developing personal career goals, attachment to, identification with, and involvement in those goals. Career commitment transcends across occupations or jobs (Hall,1976). This commitment may involve several jobs-involves a longer perspective and is related to the subjective career envisioned by the individual (Hall,1976); non-professional employees may also be committed to their careers (Hall, 1976). Chronic stress has been associated with negative job and health outcomes. Contrary, resilience has been described as a moderator between stress and its negative impact on occupation and health. In this study, we hypothesize that a high level of stress may negatively impact farmers' career commitment, contrary to resilience that a higher level of resilience might be associated with a strong career commitment. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between farmers' stress, stress resilience, and career commitment. The present study objectives are: 1) Describe farmers' stress, stress resilience, and career commitment, and 2) Describe to what extent farmers' career commitment can be explained by farmers' stress and stress resilience.

Methodology

This is a quantitative study. We collected data during Spring 2021. We sent the newly created survey using the Qualtrics platform to approximately 3000 Pennsylvania farm operators registered on the Penn State Extension database in Spring 2021. We utilized Dillman's (2014) approach for online data collection. Approximately, we obtained a 10% response rate from the study (n= 332). However, after applying inclusion and exclusion criteria and removing missing cases, we used a sample of 204 participants. This study used three instruments to measure farmers' stress, stress resilience, and career commitment. All scales were measured in a 5-point Likert Scale; where higher scores indicated higher levels of farmers' stress, more stress

resilience, and more career commitment. The farmers' Stress Scale (21 items) was developed by the authors and comprised of two domains (personal stress [7-items] and occupational stress [14-items]). The Resilience Scale (10-items) was adapted from Sinclair & Wallston (2004). The Career Commitment Scale (10-items) was adapted from Colarelli & Bishop (1990). A committee of experts determined the instrument's face and content validity. Survey responses were analyzed using SPSS 26. We used 1) Descriptive analysis to describe farmers' stress, stress resilience, and career commitment, and 2) Regression analysis to determine the relationship between the independent variables (farmers' stress and stress resilience) with our dependent variable (career commitment).

Results

For the first research objective, the overall mean score for farmer stress was 2.93 *(SD=.65),* including the overall mean of occupational stress was 3.11 *(SD= .65),* and personal stress was 2.80 *(SD= .82).* The overall mean for stress resilience was 3.64 *(SD=.55),* and career commitment was 4.02 *(SD= .60).* Thus, farmers reported less stress on personal factors than occupational factors and a high career commitment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the second research objective, results from a Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant low positive association between farmers' career commitment and farmers' stress *(r (201) = .153, p = .014),* and a significant low positive association between farmers' stress resilience and career commitment *($r_{(201)} = .220, p = .001$).* The results of multiple regression indicated a significant proportion of the total variation in overall farmers' career commitment *(R^2= 7.4%)* was predicted by farmers stress and stress resilience $F_{(2, 201)} = 8.070, p < .001$. Within the final model, farmers 'stress *($\beta = .005$; p-value = .019)* and stress resilience *($\beta = .031$; $p = .001$*) were significant predictors of farmers' career commitment.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study showed a significantly low positive association between stress and career commitment among farmers, not supporting previous studies among other professional groups. In contrast, greater stress eventually led to discontinuing their officiating career among nurses (Yip et al., 2017). Increased stress was associated with lower career commitment among teachers (Wickramasinghe, 2016). Teachers who reported greater stress were less committed to choosing a teaching career (Zurlo et al., 2007). Resilience is nurtured, developed, and mobilized in times of stress (Tait, 2008 p. 72). We found that higher resilience is associated with higher career commitment. Our findings support previous studies. According to Tait (2008), resilience was an indicator of success and long-term commitment to teaching.

Recommendations for the practice

Based on our results, we recommend that Extension practitioners and leadership educators consider developing Extension programs focused on managing employees and balancing personal and work life. In addition to design programs and training focused on building resilience to help farmers improve/ increase their ability to deal with challenges in times of uncertainty.

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