



Northern Ireland
Assembly



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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Regulation and bureaucracy – a significant source of farmers' stress

Summary

Work related stress is a significant issue and farming has been identified as being a particularly high risk occupation. The causes are varied and complex yet there has been little research examining the financial and bureaucratic burdens on farmers and where support would be best focussed.

This three stranded study utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods for a triangulated approach to explore the financial and bureaucratic factors which cause stress to farmers. The participants were male farmers, working and residing in Northern Ireland.

Data was collected from 94 farmers using face to face questionnaires and a focus group. Participants were recruited through farming related public events and from purposive sampling. The perceptions of participants were analysed and found to form a clear agreement on the major sources of stress and how support should be provided. The results indicated that the major issues contributing to farmers' work related stress included the burden of regulation and administration and financial issues.

As the results indicated that one of the most significant causes of stress was the burden of bureaucracy, it is recommended that a comprehensive overhaul of the administration burdens facing farmers is undertaken to create more accessible, user friendly and less weighty administrative procedures.

Introduction

Farming has traditionally been perceived as a stress-free rural life by those outside the industry. However, there is concern regarding work related stress experienced by farmers. Farmers and their spouses have also been shown to suffer more anxiety and depression than non-farmers and are at

higher risk of psychiatric disorders than corresponding subgroups of the non-farming population.¹ Suicide is the second most common cause of death after accidents in young farmers. It is also a significant cause of mortality in older and retired farmers and amongst farmers' wives.^{2, 3}

Farmers are subject to a number of unique stressors, many of which have been aggravated by changes in farming practice and by economic factors.³ Causes of this occupational stress include competition, regulation, disease, adverse weather, family and financial worries.⁴ The lifestyle of farmers is inextricably linked with their work, not only because of the working hours, but also because the majority live on their farms which are often relatively isolated.^{3,5,6} Farmers have previously reported perceiving their occupation to be stressful, with paperwork, financial pressures and government legislation being major contributors.^{4, 5, 7, 8}

The regulatory framework of farming is a stressor highlighted repeatedly by farmers and overwhelmingly these pressures are considered restrictive rather than protective.⁴

Due to the increasing incidence of rural stress and suicide, various interventions have been undertaken. These include a number of health promotion initiatives from non-governmental organisations. However, it has been argued that community support has a greater impact on the alleviation of distress of non-farmers than it does in farmers.⁹

Methods

This study brings together three strands of a mixed methods research project with the aim of investigating causes of stress and support issues. The research utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods for a triangulated approach and was carried out across Northern Ireland

Strand A involved quantitative research using questionnaires to full-time male farmers at a social event/agricultural show in Northern Ireland. The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data set and inferential statistics were computed to investigate the relationship between variables. The data was collected in May 2014

Strand B- also involved questionnaires to male farmers in Northern Ireland attending three livestock markets. The quantitative data was collected on two different occasions at each market. This data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data set and inferential statistics were computed to investigate relationship between variables. This data was collected in early 2015.

Strand C – involved a focus group with four male farmers in Northern Ireland and the data analysed using discourse analysis. The focus group discourse was recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. This data was collected in spring of 2015.

In all strands, procedures were in place to comply with ethical issues including informed consent, confidentiality and impartiality.

Results

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It was found that the major stress factors for farmers were finance, isolation and regulation/paperwork burdens. The findings also identified where farmers would seek support, the adequacy and preferred sources of support and perceived barriers to accessing support.

Finance was a major stressor across all strands, with the focus group identifying it as the most important source of stress for them. This is supported by findings from Strand A where 19 of 40 survey respondents (48%) reported that money was their number one issue of concern.

Strand B found that, when asked about factors which cause stress to farmers (1=not stressful 5=very stressful), on average farmers scored financial issues 3.98/5

The burden of paperwork was identified as a key stressor. Strand A found that more than half (21/ 40) of respondents stated they had some degree of stress relating to paperwork, either from understanding or completing forms or from the sheer volume.

Strand B found that when asked about factors which cause stress to farmers (1=not stressful 5=very stressful), on average farmers scored paperwork issues 4.2/5

When asked about paperwork, one farmer reported that keeping up with form filling was an issue:
'I can never get the time to fill in all the necessary forms and then I fall behind and can't remember what I have to fill in- it's all very complicated!' (Strand A, farmer 2)

Farmers often identified the volume of paperwork as an issue:
'The volume of paperwork expected from farmers is ridiculous and unnecessary! The paperwork required is constantly changing and it's difficult for farmers to keep up to date with what's required.' (Strand C)

The regional farming regulator's approach to paperwork requirements was stated as an issue:
'Farmers are constantly being watched by (the regulator) if we make a mistake or are late with forms they will punish us by withholding our single farm payment' (Strand C)

In strand C the main regulatory body was described as being 'a hindrance not a help', with one farmer highlighting difficulties in contacting them:
'When I ring (*the regulator*) for assistance I'm forced to listen to silly music for half an hour until someone answers, I don't have that sort of time to waste!' (Strand C)

Sources of support

When asked whether or not they thought that there was enough being done to help farmers who were stressed and did need help, the majority of respondents said that there was insufficient support. Some highlighted a lack of services available whilst others noted that the people who are most likely to be stressed were those who were least likely to talk.

Strand A found that less than a third (11 of 40 respondents) believed that they were adequately informed about the management of occupational stress, with one farmer querying 'is there even any

guidance on stress?'. Of those that did feel informed, many reported that the information that they valued the most was from the National Farmers Union (NFU). With respect to how information and support about occupational stress was accessed, 20 of 40 respondents stated that it came from vets or other agricultural inspectors, and 14 of the 40 respondents reported accessing information at social events.

62% of Strand B respondents said that they would feel comfortable approaching a vet and this was supported by participants in the focus group:

'I think perhaps if vets were to give farmers advice and guidance on stress it would be helpful...farmers generally respect their vet as a well-educated person who knows what they are talking about!' (Strand C)

It was largely agreed that fewer rules and regulations and a more helpful approach from the regulators would reduce stress amongst farmers. One farmer suggested that on-farm help would be welcome:

'practical assistance with paperwork where the help comes directly to the farmers...us farmers don't have time to trek to head office or sit on the phone for hours to get help.' (Strand C)

Discussion

The results revealed issues around the burden of regulation and administration on farmers, their experience of financial difficulties and, in particular, the need for support in each of these areas.

Although the results show that participants would feel comfortable approaching a doctor for support and advice regarding stress, importantly respondents also identified vets as people they would feel comfortable approaching for support. This is indicative of the close relationship farmers tend to have with their vet. This may be because vets are 'known and trusted' confidants for farmers.²

This research also found that organisations such as Rural Support and the Samaritans were not necessarily the first point of call for support as many farmers were unaware of their services. Previous studies have found widespread recognition that emotional and personal issues were rarely discussed among farmers, outside of their immediate family circle.⁵ However, in contrast, other earlier research suggests that these types of organisations provide a valuable aspect of support and are widely used by farmers but recognises that they could not substitute the longer term relationships that were necessary to support farmers through more entrenched problems.³

Respondents said that locally based support was more likely to be used and trusted, although concerns about client confidentiality might deter those most in need from seeking help. This is supported by previous studies who suggest that local support agencies were more likely to be trusted by farmers.⁴

It was also found that support agencies need to overcome the stigma the farming community attached to asking for help and offer a range of responsive and proactive services. The findings indicate the main reasons farmers would avoid approaching certain people or organisations for advice and support regarding stress were pride and embarrassment. It is evident that farmers value their reputation and are concerned about anonymity and appearing unable to cope. This is supported by findings of previous studies who found that self-efficacy and perceived stigma created barriers to seeking professional help for mental health problems.¹⁰

Whilst many farmers cited financial problems as a major cause of stress, changing regulations and paperwork remained the most important stressor identified. The burden of paperwork was identified as a key stressor from all strands, either by understanding or completing the forms or the amount of paperwork involved. These results concur with those of the NFU who stated that several actions still needed to be taken to further reduce the burden of bureaucracy¹¹. This is despite a UK government task force reporting in 2014 that it believed that the government had made significant progress in its better regulation agenda in relation to farming.¹²

From the findings of this research, issues relating to farmers' work related stress can be seen to be multifaceted and complex. In order to help combat the sources of stress, support is required on a number of fronts and in a variety of accessible methods. This supports the findings of previous research that recommended multidimensional support, reflecting the wide range of stressors and their impacts among farming communities.⁴

Conclusions

This research has revealed that the farming community may not be fully utilising external resources when seeking support for stress. Delivering effective and useful support to those who require it, in an accessible manner, taking into account the isolated conditions that much of the community is subject to, is imperative.

In particular, the burden of regulation and administration highlighted by the farmers points to the unique requirement for more support in this area. The UK Government's Better Regulation Delivery Office and the Regulators Code 2014 states that regulators should "avoid imposing unnecessary regulatory burdens through their regulatory activities" and should assess whether there are less burdensome means to achieve outcomes and supporting those who are regulated.¹³ In light of the findings of this research and the recent NFU survey¹¹, it is recommended that a comprehensive and probing overhaul of the administrative burdens required of farmers be undertaken in order to create more accessible, user-friendly and less weighty administrative procedures.

This study also highlights that although not always well utilised, support networks are valued and in particular, vets are seen as an important source of advice and help. On this basis, it is recommended that further work is undertaken to explore how the role that vets play could be acknowledged and how they could be supported enable them to provide further signposting and information to farmers.

This study was undertaken before the Brexit vote took place. It therefore does not take account of the affect that the uncertainty surrounding the prospect of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union may be having on farmers.

Farming culture is self-reliant and farmers often work under difficult and isolated conditions. Without changes and better support structures, perhaps the question should be asked, is society benefitting from their labours whilst failing to acknowledge and reduce the associated stress?

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