

REVIEW OF QUALITY OF LIFE INFLUENTIAL FACTORS AMONG IRISH FARM FAMILIES REPORTING DISABILITY

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Abstract

Quality of Life is influenced by a number of key influential factors (happiness; family life; health, and finances). The current literature pertaining to these Quality of Life factors were reviewed to examine if any variation existed among farm families experiencing disability relative to the general farm population. Almost 10% of Irish farm families experience disability. The principal cause of disability among farm families is often health-related. While farm families feel that farming is a good way of life, the experience of disability can add considerable strain on family life and relationships. Farm families experiencing disability recorded lower family farm incomes and lower participation in off-farm employment. Service and support provision was a concern for farm families experiencing disability. It is imperative the restrictive nature of disability is minimised for farm families. Improved service/support provisions for farm families reporting disability are required for this to be achieved.

Keywords: *Disability, Quality of life, farm families*

Introduction

Success in farming is a dynamic process, full of challenges and opportunities. The modern farmer, to be successful, needs to adapt swiftly and accurately to changes in the immediate and global environments (Nell and Napier, 2005). The development of a strategic plan to maximise the competitive strengths of the farm business provides focus for the farm operator, but cannot be perceived as an end-point in the management of the farm. Certain challenges and opportunities will present themselves to the farm operator and the farm family in the course of the farm family life-cycle. Some of these challenges will considerably alter the sustainability of an existing farm business plan and place the farm business in potential jeopardy in particular circumstances. The impact and experience of disability in the farm household is one such event.

Farm operators, despite romantic notions of operating within a slow-paced idyllic country setting (Gerrard, 1998) are also exposed to health and life-threatening circumstances (Zeida et al, 1993). While the farming industry claims a number of fatalities each year (Gerrard, 1998, Finnegan & Phelan, 2003), many other farm operators and farm family members are left experiencing a range of disability outcomes (Doyle, 1988, Strong & Maralani, 1999) following incidents or accidents occurring on the farm.

Disability may have an impact across many facets of life (Hosain et al., 2002) including the psychological, physical and social aspects (Bishop, 2005). Self-identity may need to be re-defined following disability, as the outcome of disability in an individual case may dramatically challenge or alter an individual's sense of self (Bishop, 2005). Roles, habits and routines may also be significantly altered following a disability event (Molyneaux-Smith et al., 2003). The impact of disability on a person is difficult to measure; however, Quality of Life, adequately defined, represents such a measure (Bishop, 2005).

Quality of Life is a term that has gained prominence in recent years, yet it has not been adequately defined (Bogue, 2004). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defined quality of life as an "individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (WHO, 1997). Bishop (2005) suggested that to measure quality of life adequately, one must understand not only the level of impact experienced in different areas of life, but the personal importance placed upon these life areas. A recent Irish study (Amarach, 2004) postulated four key factors that impact and influence quality of life. These factors, in order of importance were: 1) Happiness – as measured by how happy people say they are, 2) Family life – as measured by how satisfied people say they are with their family lives, 3) Health – how people reported their state of health, and 4) Finances – how prosperous people say they are financially.

The Agricultural industry in Ireland is an important indigenous sector accounting for 9% of Gross National Product and employing 240,000 people (Scully, 2007). The sector reports the highest level of people with disabilities relative to any other occupational group (CSO, 2002), yet little is known on the key influential factors on the Quality of Life among farm families reporting disability. Disability may create a substantial impact upon an individual's life, yet in the occupational area of agriculture and related fields, there has been relatively little research on farm-based disability.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is (a) to review current literature on the key influential factors as identified in the Amarach (2004) study, namely: 1) Happiness, 2) Family Life, 3) Health, and 4) Finances, and (b) to investigate the extent of any variation in the differences among farm families experiencing disability and those not experiencing disability.

The definition of disability used in this article is that derived from the 2005 Disability Act of the Oireachtas (Irish Parliamentary system), which stated: "Disability, in relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment" (Disability Act, 2005, p6)

Irish Agriculture

The Irish agricultural sector is diverse in many respects, with farms possessing unique individual characteristics such as scale of enterprise, system of farming, farm mechanisation along with regional and demographic characteristics (McNamara & Reidy, 1992). Over 60% of the land area of Ireland is used for agricultural purposes, with 79% devoted to grass (3.4 million hectares), 11% to rough grazing (0.5 million hectares) and 10% to crop production (0.4 million hectares) (Dept. of Ag & Food, 2006). Beef production is the primary enterprise among Irish farms, followed by dairy, mixed grazing and sheep production respectively (Census of Agriculture, 2000).

The majority of Irish farms are owner-occupied (Bogue, 2004; McNamara & Reidy, 1992) with a rich inter-generational transfer tradition. However the agricultural sector has experienced significant consolidation in recent years (Finnegan, 2007). The number of farms decreased by 17% between 1991 and 2000. The average size of farm increased by 21% in the same period of time. The sector also experienced a 17.5% reduction in the numbers of regular farm operatives (Crowley et al., 2004). Primary agriculture accounts for 5.7% of the labour in the total labour market (Dept. of Ag. & Food, 2006), yet the sector contributes approximately 30% of work related fatalities with children and elderly farmers (>65 years) primarily affected. A conservative estimate of 3,000 accidents is reported for the occurrence of farm accidents each year (Finnegan, 2007), frequently resulting in premature death or disability (Doyle, 1988).

Irish farm families reporting disability

It is estimated that 8.8% of farm families experience a disability (CSO, 2002). The farm operator reported the highest incidence of disability among farm families, accounting for approximately 40% of farm family disability (McNamara et al., 2003). The incidence of disability and the number of disabilities experienced increased with age, as older farmers (>65yrs) experienced a higher incidence of disability than their younger counterparts (McNamara et al., 2003; CSO, 2002).

The most commonly reported type of disability among farm families were physical disabilities, with the primary cause being health-related. Arthritis and cardio-vascular problems were the main health-related causes among farm operators. Physical injury, 70% of which resulted from farm work, was another reported cause of disability among farm families. The remaining 30% of physical injury was attributed to non-farm causes, most notably vehicular and industrial accidents. The highest incidence of non-physical disability among farm families was recorded in children experiencing learning and intellectual disability (McNamara et al., 2003). The occurrence of disability was independent of the type of farming system in that study. However, where the farm operator experienced disability, a higher proportion of these farms had cattle rearing/other cattle systems as their principal system of farming compared to farms nationally (McNamara et al., 2003). There were proportionately fewer specialist dairy and sheep farm operators with disability than for all farms nationally and proportionately more in tillage farming in that study. Finnegan et al (2005) reported from case studies that the system of farming may be altered due to the presence of farm operator disability. In that study, it was not feasible for farm operators experiencing disability following injury to maintain the scale and system of farming in which they had previously engaged. It follows that the labour requirements and commitments in addition to the intensity of work activities in different farm enterprises may preclude many farm operators experiencing significant disabilities from fully participating in these enterprises unless significant and appropriate adjustments are made to their individual farm situations.

Quality of Life

The issue of Quality of Life was reviewed in the current literature under each of the influential factors as identified in the Amarach (2004) study. These were identified above as Happiness, Family life, Health and Finances. In this paper each factor will be discussed separated.

On the issue of happiness, farming for many of those involved is far more than a set of tasks to be performed; it also forms part of identity (Molyneaux-Smith et al., 2003) and lifestyle (Finnegan, 2007). Bogue (2004) and Connolly et al (2007) found that farmers, generally, were happy with their farm situation in Ireland. The majority of farmers (98%) indicated that farming is a good way of life (Connolly et al., 2007), and Bogue (2004) reported that farmers considered their life to be relaxed or balanced. In spite of the changed nature of farming, where farmers must now cope with an increasing amount of regulation, being your own boss was identified as being important to farmers (Connolly et al, 2007) in 93% of cases. Molyneaux-Smith et al (2003) reported similar sentiments among farm operators with disabilities.

On the issue of family life, the family home is an integral part of farm life. Up to three family generations often live on the same farm (Finnegan, 2007). Despite the long hours typically operated by farm operators, farm operators generally feel that they have adequate time to spend with their family and friends (Bogue, 2004). In the same study, younger farmers (<35years) were more likely to report adequate family time than older farmers. However, as farm size increased, farm operators tended to have less time for family and friends. In addition, farm operators who were engaged in off-farm employment were less likely to report adequate family time than those not engaged in off-farm employment (Bogue, 2004). Almost half of the farm operators in that study had an off-farm job, but they spent their vacation time from their off-farm employment position catching up upon farm work that required attention.

The family offer the main source of assistance to farm operators experiencing disability in their efforts to remain farming (Molyneaux-Smith et al., 2003). However, the experience of disability can place a considerable strain on family life, with family members often having to make significant personal sacrifices to keep the farm functioning when the farm operator experiences disability (Finnegan et al., 2005). Family relationships can be affected as individuals with disability experience inherent frustration and impatience in their attempts to cope with disability. Particular strain can be placed on the spouse. The spouse may have to balance off-farm employment, work on the farm in addition to attending to the needs of the farm family member experiencing disability (McNamara et al., 2003; Finnegan et al., 2005). Farm operators experiencing disability, together with the family may “experience a shrinking social world due to the extra time required for occupational performance, appointments with health professionals, physical barriers, or societal attitudes” (Molyneaux-Smith et al., 2003)

On the issue of health it was suggested that farm operators generally take less care of their health when compared against other occupational groups (Hope et al., 1999). The physical nature of farm work, coupled with exposure to numerous hazards and stress caused from long working hours, isolation, and financial pressures may lead to restrictive health conditions among farm operators (McNamara & Reidy, 1997; Finnegan, 2007; Stepanyan & Blasoni, 2005; Zeida et al., 1993). The principal cause of disability among farm families, as indicated above, is often health related (McNamara et al., 2003). Seventy five percent of farm operators that experienced disability felt that farm related ill-health was the primary cause of their disability (McNamara & Reidy, 1997). In particular, respiratory problems were identified as being the dominant health-related disability, with back problems and allergies being frequently reported (McNamara & Reidy, 1992).

The provision of adequate services and supports is important to provide stability and quality of life for rural inhabitants (Halseth & Ryser, 2006). Rural communities were reported as often being disadvantaged in terms of accessing health care services (Fitzgerald et al., 2001). The absence of professional support and community-care facilities continues to be an issue in rural Ireland, and this leads to personal anxiety and distress among farm families experiencing disability (Finnegan et al., 2005; McNamara et al., 2003).

McNamara et al (2003) reported that almost 75% of farm families reporting disability did not avail of any State or voluntary services and on farms where the farm operator experienced disability, only 7.5% of them availed of any State or voluntary service. Lack of awareness on what services and supports are

available to farm families, coupled with the requisite assessment procedures for accessing certain services (Finnegan et al., 2005) may explain, to some extent, why the uptake of these services was so low.

In Ireland, farm families experiencing disability must satisfy a means-test before they may be considered eligible for any form of financial disability payment. The means-test is a complex process, with virtually all sources of income taken into account in the eligibility assessment (Comhairle, 2005). Where an individual is married, or living with another person as husband and wife, the means of the spouse or partner are taken into account as well as the claimant's own means (Dept of Social and Family Affairs, 2006). The means-test varies, depending on whether the claimant experiencing disability can or cannot continue farming. In the situation where the farm operator experiences disability, the value of the agricultural land is taken into account when calculating the means of the farm operator when the farm operator cannot continue farming. However, it is not taken into account in the means test where the farm operator continues to farm. The prospective income from the farm in the following 12-month period is used where the farm operator continues farming in assessing eligibility (Dept of Social and Family Affairs, 2006).

While the above illustrates that ill-health is a contributory cause of disability, it does not infer that all farm operators, or farm family members, experiencing disability experience lower levels of health than the general farming population. As Susman (1994) stated "some disabled people are not sick".

On the issue of finances, farm operators were reported as being less willing to share information about their economic or financial situation to the wider agricultural community (Prospect Management Services, 2006) compared to physical farm information. In spite of the rapid economic growth experienced by the Irish economy during the mid 1990's (Powell, 2003), "the buying power of farm incomes declined by 17% between 1995 and 2004" (CORI Justice, 2006). Direct payments (subsidies) presently constitute 94% of farm incomes (O'Donoghue, 2007) with farm families becoming every reliant on off-farm employment to generate income. Presently an estimated 52% of Irish farm families have off-farm employment (Connolly et al., 2004). These figures represent a dramatic change since Ireland entered the European Union, where farm income constituted 70% of the total household income. By 2000 however, this proportion had fallen to 41% (Finnegan, 2007). Farm families with disabilities experienced the same financial conditions and social challenges as other farm families. However, they have additional costs and challenges related to the requisite specialised tools and equipment, and the hiring of extra assistance in carrying out farm tasks (Molyneaux-Smith et al., 2003). These research workers observed that modification costs in excess of \$100,000 have being reported in the United States and often with no financial assistance from State or other sources. McNamara et al (2003) and Finnegan et al (2005) reported financial losses in farm income when the farm operator experienced disability. McNamara et al (2003) quantified the reduction in income suffered by farm families at a rate of €24/ha of farm income compared to farms where disability was not experienced. Finnegan et al (2005) observed that the loss of spousal income was a common financial outcome of farm operator disability. The family farm income (FFI) was lower on farms where the impact was "major" by €5,098 compared to farms with no disability, or €3,678 compared to farms with "some disability" (McNamara et al., 2003). At present, off-farm employment makes an important contribution to farm household income as outlined above. McNamara et al (2003) reported that farm operators experiencing disability were two and a half time less likely to be involved in off-farm employment than farm operators not experiencing disability. The proportion of spouses with an off-farm job where the farm operator experiences disability was lower than on non-disability farms while the corresponding proportion in respect of farms where a person other than the farm operator experienced disability was higher (McNamara et al., 2003).

Conclusion

Disability affects almost 10% of Irish farm families with the farm operator reporting the highest incidence among family members, accounting for almost 40% of reported cases. The primary cause of disability

among farm families is health-related, followed by personal injury. The review of the literature highlighted important issues experienced among farm families. The experience of disability has significant effects on various aspects of family life, with family members often having to make significant personal sacrifices to keep the farm functioning when the farm operator experiences disability (Finnegan et al., 2005). Relationships among family members can also be affected as individuals with disability experience feelings of frustration and impatience in their attempts to cope with disability. Farm families tend to experience a reduced social network following disability, due largely to social attitudes, physical barriers, and the increased time required to complete farm tasks. The lower participation levels in off-farm employment, coupled with reduced operations and considerable modification costs, may result in lower family farm incomes among farm families experiencing disability. The lack of professional advice to address specific needs of farm families experiencing disability and the assessment methods currently used to comply with State supports tend to exacerbate this issue. However despite the provisions for farm families experiencing disability, they report similar happiness sentiments as farm families where disability is not experienced. Ongoing research work at University College Dublin, and Teagasc Rural Economy Research Centre aims to identify the service and support requirements of farm operators experiencing disability and develop strategies for the implementation of such services.

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