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Challenges of Working as Agricultural Extension Agents and Balancing Family Responsibilities

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author NM designed the study, wrote the protocol and supervised the work. Author SS carried out all laboratories work and performed the statistical analysis. Author SS managed the analyses of the study. Authors NM and SS managed the literature searches and edited the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The career of an extension agent can be challenging as well as rewarding depending on the job duties and family responsibilities. Agricultural extension agents play a critical role towards the survival of extension related activities that improve the production and sustainability of farming communities for future generations. In today's workforce, employees must able to balance work productivity and supporting family with the best time management practices. Past research regarding extension agents who were involved with 4-H activities shows a high level of stress due to different job responsibilities, which effects work quality and family responsibilities. The current research studies extension agents involved with 4-H programs in the United States to measure correlations between work and family responsibilities through the implementation of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT). The level of stress accumulated by extension agents is caused by more than marital lifestyle [$t(178.56) = -3.48$, $p < .01$, $d = .36$]. The regression model of agents' scores on the LWMAT also hints that other factors may be influencing the marital distress,

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as the regression model developed from the significantly correlated variables explained only 16% of the variance in the agent's scores of marital distress. We suggest different coping mechanism for this "Sandwich Generation" to relieve stress based on prioritizing, planning, and building a strong social network.

Keywords: Locke-Wallace marital adjustment test; sandwich generation; stress; extension services; 4-H; family and marital satisfaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Avoiding burnout by balancing job and family is a key to success for extension agents involved with 4-H programs. Extension faculty members often face conflicting expectations from the two groups of individuals that have an importance in their lives: clients and family members [1]. Their work with extension staff members include extended working hours, client expectations, balancing busy work and family schedules, and the need for personal renewal with issues affecting family life. An Extension Committee on Organization and Policy report (ECOP) identified a "workaholic culture" among extension agents as jobs that absorbs almost all of a person's time and leads to harmful effects on the family [2]. This disruptive effect is true for many professionals, and if work becomes the absolute value, then family may end up as a third priority. Numerous studies have found that men and women view work-family conflicts differently [3-8], and in addition, differences have also been found among ethnicities, with Hispanics displaying a greater gender disparity in negative work-family spillover than Blacks and Whites [9]. In the past two decades, female extension agents were not allowed to be married due to the long hours traveling and teaching that would result in the extension worker spending too much time away from home. However, extension agents still report the time requirements for their jobs are overwhelming, regardless of the improved transportation, technology, and atmosphere [1]. The family structure has undergone dramatic changes, as dual-parent families with one income had become less common, being replaced by the dual-family income, single-parent families [10]. It has been found that work-family border is not symmetrically permeable, with work interfering in family life more frequently than family interfering with work life [11]. Researchers found that 4-H agents in Kentucky expressed the need for stress and time management training as early as 1981, identifying 23 job responsibilities that were stressors [12]. Stress and burnout amongst extension employees has also been found to be reported in numerous states, with some studies noting a direct relationship between extension work and family problems [13].

Studies have been conducted on stress and burnout among employees in numerous fields, most of which revealed a significant difference of work impact on marriage and family life [13-15]. Researchers found that employees were willing to attend workshops and seminars to balance the conflict in their home and work lives [1]. The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) adopted a vision statement that a career with extension would be a career where "there is opportunity for balance between work and family life." If the extension system to lead the positive change for the extension agents and their families, it must able to create a balance for their employees.

1.1 Literature Review

The concept of a family is one of oldest institutions known in society. The family unit came into being to provide a nurturing environment for adult couples and their children, with the extended family providing the necessity to merge multiple generations and providing emotional, financial and physical support when needed. Within this context, spouses and children mature as individuals, spouses grow as a couple, and the family develops as a unit, which enhances society to develop a positive structure [16]. Marriage has often been treated anthropomorphically, with counselors, educators and researchers discussing characteristics of vitality. It has been stated that there are five vital signs that couples can use to determine the "health" of their marriage: (a) Partners who are involved in marriage feel safe about themselves, (b) Partners have open communication and feel their words will be valued by their significant other, (c) Partners feel secure in disclosing their feelings to their significant other, (d) Emotional feelings and restraints are understood on both sides of the relationship, and (e) the individual's "personal space" is respected at all times [17]. These indicators could be self-analyzed, and

would help the couple assess the strength and vitality of their relationship. In addition to measuring the "health" of a marriage, numerous models have been developed for analyzing marital quality and functioning [18].

A marital happiness model has been developed from research dating to the early 1900's, and includes dimensions of satisfaction and tension which measures marital happiness [19]. Satisfaction measures include couple-level activities such as visiting friends together, attending outside activities, intimate conversations, and showing affection and appreciation for each other. Marriage tension is measured from responses about friends, finances, physical and emotional feelings, extended family, time away from home, spousal employment, and personal habits. Gottman and Notarius described a mathematical model of marital interaction that invoked two interlocking nonlinear difference equations (one per spouse) that computed influence functions [20]. Other researchers described a demand/withdrawal pattern that had been developed to explain marital engagement [14]. The pattern shows that increasing demands by one spouse often leads to increased avoidance by the other spouse. Longitudinal studies have shown that 40% to 70% of couples experience a downward trend in their marriage life after the birth of their first child, with a concurrent increase in marital conflict by a factor of nine [20]. During this first year, couples have shown to regress towards stereotypical gender roles and have reported greater conflict within their marriages; fathers have withdrawn from work and decreased communication with their spouses.

It has been found the rate of divorce near the middle of the 19th century was only 5% of first marriages, but the rate had changed to about half of the first marriages ending in divorce by the year 2000, with remarriage after divorce becoming common [21]. Second marriages have also had a greater likelihood of separation, and about one of every six adults will endure two or more divorces throughout their lifetime. Sears and Galambos found women's work conditions were associated with stress, which was inter-correlated with marital adjustment [6]. Lavee and Ben-Ari investigated the work-family relationship through the use of daily diaries and found a mediating effect of personal emotional state on work experiences carries over to one's mood at home, and found negative moods of the spouses led to increased dyadic distance [22]. Gottman and Notarius found linkages between couples who had marital conflicts and children with problematic childhood outcomes such as depression, social withdrawal, lower academic achievement, and poor health [20]. Hamilton and Hamilton found that when parents were in marital distress, the "Five C's" of human development – competence, character, connection, confidence and contribution – were relegated to the child to develop on his or her own [23]. For example, Van Tillburg and Miller interviewed extension agents who were currently employed in Ohio to determine the factors that influenced employees to leave their jobs [24]. Participants completed several questions about job satisfaction, but questions regarding family roles and family expectations were not included. Roehling and Moen found that some stressors that were placed on employees who were trying to balance a family role included bring work home during family time and leaving work to attend to a sick child [25]. The researchers further suggested that the 1950's was a time period with the lowest degree of work-family stress, since work and family domains were considered gender-specific domains. Winslow, Wolchick and Sander concurred with Roehling and Moen, suggesting part of the reason work-family conflict did not receive prior research was that researchers often debated whether the conflict was primarily a woman's issue [25,26].

Kossek and Ozeki conducted a meta-analysis to estimate the correlation between work/family conflict and individual job and life satisfaction for populations studied prior to 1998 [27]. The researchers identified variations in findings based on methodologies used in the previous studies. They also identified a gap in the research from the studies they reviewed, specifically studies that accessed the concept of conflict but did not examine in detail the policies. Other researchers approached the relationship between job stressors and marital well-being using linkages to job exhaustion [4]. The five areas of input that were considered included: job insecurity, job autonomy, time pressures at work, good leadership relations, and work-family conflict. These jobs stressors impacted context-specific occupational well-being which they termed "job exhaustion" and, in return, they found an association with overall psychosomatic well-being. They showed psychosomatic well-being affected family well-being, which they termed "marital satisfaction". Of the five job stressors studied, four were directly associated with job exhaustion. Time commitment adds

pressure towards the job and family and creates conflict which most strongly predicts job exhaustion. Job insecurity and poor relations with leadership also linked to job exhaustion. Job exhaustion predicted psychosomatic symptoms, with beta weights of 0.73 for men and 0.74 for women, and the resultant model accounted for 45 to 51 percent of the variance in job exhaustion and 57 to 58 percent of the variance in psychosomatic symptoms for men and women, respectively. The psychosomatic symptoms also predicted marital satisfaction, with beta weights of -0.24 for men and -0.22 for women. However the explained variance in marital satisfaction was only 5% for men and 6% for women. The researchers suggested that job insecurity was related to marital satisfaction through the mechanisms of job exhaustion and psychosomatic health. Orden and Bradburn introduced a theoretical model of marital happiness designed for therapeutic diagnosis, analysis, and prediction [20]. Their model showed that marital happiness consisted of two dimensions that were responsible for predicting happiness in a marriage, satisfaction and tension. When participants were questioned about their marital happiness, over a third (36%) said they were “pretty happy,” with only 3% reporting they were “not too happy”. The skewing of the distribution towards “very happy” was not surprising, for previous research has shown the majority of couples interviewed will say their marriage is “happy”.

Previous research in the sector of extension employees shows that the ability to manage stress and work benefits the employees and improves organizational effectiveness. There were three main areas where extension agents’ performance and stress levels were researched as follows: 4-H agent, marital satisfaction, and job characteristics. 4-H agent is an informal youth education program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture where staff members are assigned to work with volunteers and youth in each state [1]. The staff members are employed as full-time agents at the county or area level and are employed to work directly with members and leaders in 4-H programs. Marital satisfaction is the degree of personal satisfaction an individual feels toward their marital quality; it is a process where couples progress toward a state of martial satisfaction [14]. For the current study, the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale used to measure and assess these factors [15]. Job characteristics reflect the multi-dimensionality of a worker’s job role, which include factors such as work hours, travel demands, weekend work, and control over work hours.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized a correlational design to determine extension agents’ assessments of work and marital characteristics. The population for the study were the extension agents who work with the 4-H program in the Extension Southern Region at the county or multi-county level (N = 489). The population selected for the study were full-time, county or area-level extension agents employed by both 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities in the United States to work with the 4-H program. Orden and Bradburn developed the Marriage Adjustment Balance Scale to assess the overall functioning of the marriage for therapeutic diagnosis, analysis and prediction [19]. Their scale assessed marital happiness by measuring its two dimensions – marital satisfaction and marital tension. Sabatelli explains any review of contemporary measures of marital adjustment must consider the Locke-Wallace Marriage Adjustment Test (LWMAT) [28]. Locke and Wallace computed a high reliability coefficient of .90, using the split-half technique with a correction by the Spearman-Brown formula [15]. In their validation test, 96% of the well-adjusted participants achieved appropriate scores on the instrument, indicating good test validity. The LWMAT is still one of the most widely used instruments by contemporary researchers. The descriptive calculated for the study variables to evaluate frequencies of responses, with t-tests being used to compare mean differences for the never married agents and the study group of agents in a relationship. Pearson correlations were computed for the variables to determine relationships between variables for the study group respondents. After transformation, due to normality and linearity issues, multiple linear regression analyses were employed to determine a structural equation model for the relationships between job characteristics and marital satisfaction.

3. RESULTS

The researcher first determined whether there were observable differences between agents (N = 489) who had never been married and those who were in a relationship. The two groups were named “never married” and “study group” for the

purpose of the study, and they had significant differences in several variables. The agents in relationships were older [$t(188.41) = -10.53$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.04$], had a lower percent 4-H work assignment [$t(233.65) = 4.20$, $p < .01$, $d = .36$], a longer length of service [$t(224.30) = -6.40$, $p < .01$, $d = .57$], had been in their present position longer [$t(221.18) = -5.35$, $p < .01$, $d = .56$], drove more work-related miles per month [$t(487.34) = -4.82$, $p < .01$, $d = .30$], and had a higher educational attainment [$t(178.56) = -3.48$, $p < .01$, $d = .36$]. There were no significant differences between the two groups in the hours worked per week, weeknights and weekends worked per month, and out-of-pocket money spent per month for work. The after-hours time is divided similarly between the two groups.

It appeared the respondents who were in relationships were picking up other duty assignments in addition to 4-H, were participating in more district and state events, and were regulating time away from home. Because three of these variables could be related to length of service (age, length of service, time in present position), this can show that agents take on extra duties aside from 4-H. If trends reported by Rogers (1996) also proved to be true with this group of 4-H agents, lower levels of marital happiness could be expected from this population. After analysis, however, less than one-fifth of the group respondents (19.0%) reported being less than happy in their marriage, and the ratio appeared stable for both male and female respondents.

Pearson correlations were determined for the LWMAT score ($M = 104.19$, $SD = 34.85$) and the other study variables (see Table 1).

Six of the variables were positively correlated to LWMAT score [work happiness ($r = .15$, $n = 501$, $p < .01$, two tails, r2 = .02), mate educational level ($r = .16$, $n = 489$, $p < .01$, two tails, r2 = .03), religious attendance ($r = .12$, $n = 453$, $p < .01$, two tails, r2 = .01), mate religious attendance ($r = .21$, $n = 431$, $p < .01$, two tails, r2 = .04), the belief that night and weekend work created tension at home ($r = .22$, $n = 486$, $p < .01$, two tails, r2 = .05), and the belief that work creates family financial difficulties ($r = .15$, $n = 485$, $p < .01$, two tails, $r2 = .02$)]. Work happiness, agent religious attendance, and the belief that work created financial difficulty at home showed small positive effects (small relationships), while mate educational level, mate religious attendance, and the belief that nights and weekend work created tension at home had medium effects (medium correlations). The other three variables [years as a 4-H agent ($r = -.12$, $n = 498$, $p < .01$, two tails, r2 = .01), agent educational level ($r = -.11$, $n = 494$, $p < .01$, two tails, $r2 = .01$), and the belief that the agents could maintain a good job/family balance ($r = -.19$, $n = 483$, $p < .01$, two tails, $r2 = .03$)] were negatively correlated with the LWMAT scores. These all showed small effects, except for the perception of maintaining balance, which had a medium correlation. Based on these results, it would appear work issues may not play a major role in marital distress, but may contribute through issues with how one manages time.

The transformed data set was used to build a regression model to explain the significant relationships of variables to the LWMAT global score. The regression models were developed using backward regression, and four models emerged. The first three models had R^2 values of .16 (medium effect). Variables were removed based on an F value of .10, and the R^2 value was used to determine which model to report. After "work", "happiness" was removed from model 1, the change in R^2 was .002 for the second model. After the participants' "religious attendance" was removed, the change in R^2 for the third model was .002. When "job/family balance" was removed, the change in R^2 was .005 for the fourth model, which was an increase over the change in calculating the previous models. The adjusted R^2 did not change as the first three models were built, but was reduced by .003 when the fourth model was created. Model 3, then, was the last model considered and is the model presented in Table 2.

The model explained 16% (R^2=.16) of the variance in the LWMAT scores for agents, and included no observable work-related response, three affective work-related variables (a belief that the job created family financial difficulties, a belief that participants could maintain a good balance of job/work responsibilities, and a belief that night and weekend work created tension at home), two agent-specific demographic variables (years as an agent and educational level attained) and two mate-specific demographic variable (mate religious attendance and mate educational attainment). For this population of 4-H agents, and in response to the first research question, it appeared work-related variables did not play as much of a significant role as other factors in causing marital distress. Educational attainment and religious practices have been

Table 1. Significant correlations of variables associated with LWMAT scores

Variable	*M*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. LWMAT score	104.19	1	.22*	.22*	-.19*	.16*	.15*	.15*	.12*	-.11*	-.11*
2. Night/Weekend work	2.58	.22*	1	.09	-.44*	.06	.20*	.29*	.08	.03	.10
3. Mate religious attendance	3.50	.22*	.09	1	-.09	.21*	-.02	-.02	.76*	.15*	.04
4. Work/Family balance [a]	2.98	-.19*	-.44*	-.09	1	-.06	-.22*	-.36*	-.02	-.03	-.05
5. Mate educational level	3.71	.16*	.06	.21*	-.06	1	.01	.08	.10	.10	.10
6. Work and financial difficulty [a]	3.42	.15*	.20*	-.02	-.22*	.01	1	.29*	.07	-.03	.02
7. Work happiness [b]	4.63	.15*	.29*	-.02	-.36*	.08	.29*	1	.06	.04	.01
8. Religious attendance	3.73	.12*	.08	.76*	-.02	.10	.07	.06	1	.15*	.08
9. Years worked as 4-H agent	11.20	-.11*	.03	.15*	-.03	.10	-.03	.04	.15*	1	.24
10. Educational level	4.43	-.11*	.10	.04	-.03	.10	.02	.01	.08	.24	1

**denotes significance at p < .01*

[a] *denotes a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree)*

[b] *denotes a 7-point scale (1 = Very unhappy, 7 = Very happy)*

reported in the literature as possible causes of marital stress, and this study adds credence to those assertions. Additionally, dyadic features were not part of the regression models, as they comprised the LWMAT score and could have caused severe issues with redundancy. These factors, however, may provide the underlying answers as to the marital distress experienced by 4-H agents.

Using a score of 100 on the LWMAT as the cut point, agents were classified into groups of "distressed" (scores below 100) or "non-distressed" (scores of 100 or more). Based on the scores, just over a third of the study group (36.7%) appeared to have relationships that were in distress, as compared to 19% of the group who reported feeling less than "happy" in their relationship. Group means comparisons with *t*-tests indicated noteworthy variances between distressed and non-distressed respondents in three work-related variables (see Table 3).

Agents who were in a distressed relationship responded more negatively to the questions regarding "night and weekend work creates tension at home" [$t(436) = -4.35$, $p < .01$, $d = .42$], "maintenance of a good job/family balance" [$t(481) = 2.66$, $p < .01$, $d = .26$], and "work creates financial difficulty with family finances" [$t(318.49) = -3.43$, $p < .01$, $d = .34$]. These responses described agents who were in the midst of wrestling with the balance of time and responsibilities, and believed their jobs created stress that spilled over to their families. Additionally, one agent attribute and one mate attribute produced variables that showed significance. Agents who were in a distressed relationship tended to have a lower educational level [$t(385.50) = 2.63$, $p < .01$, $d = .24$], and their mates attended fewer religious services and events [$t(256.58) = -3.62$, $p < .01$, $d = .38$].

The relationship between job characteristics and marital satisfaction for Extension 4-H agents, based on the findings reported in Table 1, show a significant negative correlation between two job-related variables ("years as a 4-H agent" and "job/family balance") with LWMAT and a significant positive correlation between three job-related variables ("work happiness", "belief that night and weekend work creates tension", and "job creates financial pressure for the family") with LWMAT. Based on the scale anchors "strongly agree" and "agree", the influences of these variables show relationships and directions that are consistent with findings in the literature reporting spillover from work life to family life and vice versa. Directionality and influence from marital satisfaction to work perceptions may also explain these directions, as agents with a low level of marital stress might be more willing to agree they can maintain a good balance of job and family responsibilities, feel less tension from working nights and weekends, and may not feel financial pressure from investing in their work. The regression model of agents' scores on the LWMAT also hints that other factors may be influencing the marital distress, as the regression model developed from the significantly correlated variables explained only 16% of the variance in the agent's scores of marital distress. Based on these tensions, it cannot be concluded that hours, nights, weekends and financial investments in work caused stress or distress. The literature identifies several variables that are estimated to be related to marital distress, such as educational level and religious involvement. The direct cause of marital distress is not found yet other variables can contribute to marital distress. The fact that only one work-related variable is identified with distress in a past relationship suggests other factors could have contributed more to the marital distress and dissolution than just the work-related factors.

Table 2. Regression model for agents' LWMAT scores

	B	***SE B***	**β**	**CI**	**CI**
				Lower	**Upper**
Constant	96.56	18.85	7.36	59.51	133.62
Educational level	-8.11	3.44	-.11	-14.88	-1.34
Mate religious attendance	5.64	1.35	.19	2.88	8.19
Night and weekend work tension	5.02	1.69	.15	1.70	8.35
Mate educational level	4.27	1.45	.14	1.41	7.13
Work creates family financial difficulty	3.26	1.52	.10	.28	6.24
Ability to maintain a work/family balance	-2.57	1.68	-.08	-5.87	.74
Years worked as a 4-H agent	-.52	.19	-.13	-.88	-.15

Table 3. Significant means comparisons based on marital stress

	Group	*N*	Mean	*SD*	*t*	df	*d*
Night/Weekend Tension	Distressed	173	2.29	1.08	-4.35*	484	.42
	Non-distressed	313	2.74	1.08			
Maintain Balance	Distressed	171	3.15	1.13	2.66*	481	.26
	Non-distressed	312	2.87	1.03			
Work Creates Financial Difficulty	Distressed	172	3.18	1.18	-3.43*	318	.34
	Non-distressed	313	3.55	1.05			

**denotes significance at p < .01*

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research looked at the relationship between job characteristics and marital satisfaction for Extension 4-H agents in the United States. The process first required to identify observable differences between agents who were never married and those who were in relationships. Agents who in relationships were older, leading to the conclusion the agents' age and length of service were the primary influences for the variables that showed statistical significance. When combined with agent comments, it appeared many of these agents had adopted a self-protection approach from their families, as they worked slightly fewer hours and fewer weeknights per week than the agents who were never married. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) was an instrument used to measure marital distress by assessing multiple factors of relationship status and providing a global score [15]. Agents who were in relationships were found to not be in marital distress based on the LWMAT scores. Results from Pearson correlations revealed three variables that had significant negative correlations to the marital distress score (i.e., years as a 4-H agent, agent educational level, and job/family balance) and revealed three variables that revealed significant positive correlations to the marital distress score (i.e., work happiness, night and weekend work create tension, and job creates financial pressure for the family). A regression model showed that factors other than job characteristics may have a stronger influence on marital distress, due to the fact that the model contained agent attributes (length of service and educational attainment) and mate attributes (educational attainment and religious attendance).

The LWMAT score included a cut-off of 100 to separate groups into "distressed relationships" (scores below 100) and "non-distressed relationships" (scores above 100). Under this categorization, the two groups showed significant differences in three variables (i.e., night and weekend work tension, job/family balance, and job creates financial pressure for family), signifying that the agents in distressed relationships felt their jobs had a negative impact on their relationship. Due to the fact that other work-related variables were not significantly different between the two groups, we conclude that job characteristics were not influencing marital distress as much as marital distress was influencing the perception of job characteristics. In support of this conclusion, other factors that have been shown to play roles in the dissolution of relationships showed significant between the two groups, suggesting that work may not have been the prime factor in martial distress experienced by the agents. Since the other variables were agent and mate attributes, non-work related influences may have played a part in the breakup of past relationships.

Individuals who are "sandwiched" between working as agricultural extension agents and balancing their work responsibilities comprise a major group of employees who represent the 4-H responsibilities in the United. It should be the responsibility of extension services to prepare its employees for the stresses that they will encounter. Ironically, agents within the agricultural system present programs for clients related to issues that our own agents are currently facing. In addition to equipping younger agents to be successful in their careers and updating agents through subject-matter training, consideration must be given to preparing agents to handle life just as we prepare our own clientele.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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