

Social Work Practical Strategies for the Families of Offshore Employees in Oil Industry (Qualitative Research)

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Received: 25 February 2018 / Received in revised form: 25 May 2018, Accepted: 29 May 2018, Published online: 05 September 2018

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Abstract

Introduction: Men employment in the offshore oil industry is coupled with their intermittent absence from the family that Causing them to be challenging in family life. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to recognizing the Social work practical strategies for encounter theirs family issues. **Methodology:** The present study was conducted through a qualitative content analysis approach; it included 28 subjects who were selected purposefully. The participants included 18 employees, 5 experts, 3 wives and 2 managers, with at least 5 years of experience in the field. Required data collected through interview, observation and focus group; it was written word for word, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis method. The sampling ended when data and categories saturation was realized. **Findings:** Data analysis led to the emergence of four main abstract categories, including “Training and informing”, “Consulting services”, “Strengthening social participation and support”, “Intervention in specific situations”, there have been formed a total number of 13 sub-categories. **Conclusion:** Applying the strategies of social work practice can play an important role in the survival and improvement family life of offshore employees.

Keywords: Social Work, Family, Offshore Employee.

Introduction

The concept of family is central both to social work training and to its professional practice, where its practitioners are brought into contact with various types of family in a range of professional contexts (Gavriel et al., 2014). Since offshore Working Schedule in the oil industry is based on 14 days on (12 hours a day) and 14 days off, this situation has created a kind of family interaction involving continuous periodic two-week absence of the husband from home that affects the status of the family and spouse. This pattern of work imposes significant necessities, certain psychological and social adaptation, and specific barriers and complications both for the individual and their families (Clark et al., 1985; Lewis et al., 1988). The exploration and production of oil and gas in the offshore and other remote areas from home is regarded as a job which separates individuals physically and culturally from home and family (Lewis et al., 1988). The research and background literature on the issue of the family of offshore employees has repeatedly emphasized the concepts of change, transfer, adjustment and adaptation. While all families face situational and developmental changes that require a way to regulate their functioning and the way they communicate, it is necessary to pay more attention to the performance conditions of offshore workers' families. Change is stressful for the family of offshore employees; thus, a way must be discovered, and implemented, to respond to such change and maintain the living condition. The nature of offshore work involves frequent family constraints and transfers which create a different situation in comparison to non-offshore work. There is a general public perception of offshore work according to which this kind of work will put pressure on the status of marriage and families and could lead to the failure of the marriage of the individuals with such working conditions (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). While the management of family affairs and participatory decision-makings are dependent on continuous access and parental communication, offshore workers are usually away from home for family ceremonies and important life events (Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004). Offshore workers often, due to several hours of travel, arrive home exhausted. Separation and rejoining are generally recognized as the most difficult emotional moments for couples and

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families (Gallegos, 2006). As Zargham Borujeni et al. (2013) in a study found that children of the rotational employees of the National Iranian Drilling Company were more exposed to anxiety than the other children in Ahvaz, and the father's rotational occupation had an effect on the child anxiety (Zargham et al., 2013). The results of Gholizadeh and Moradianzadeh research (2004) demonstrated that offshore work is significantly associated with disorder in children's upbringing and family management (Gholizadeh & Moradianzadeh, 2004).

Social work has a long history of engaging families and working within family systems to support growth, development, and change. Contemporary and enduring challenges facing today's families provide an opportunity for social work to advance scientific knowledge and practice strategies in the field (Tricia & Goodley, 2017). In this regard, Social workers can use basic professional principles, skills, and values in the delivery of professional services thus helping the clients to solve their life problems, and improve his/her performance in psychosocial aspects (Raheb et al., 2016).

Family social workers should be able to identify potential sources of risk and ecological opportunities for profound understanding of families. They also consider factors beyond the boundaries of the family and focus on multiple scopes of family functioning; scopes that extend beyond internal relationships. They should also be aware of the roles that members play within the family; those which are aligned with their external roles. Child management techniques and parental approaches are the skills in the family training approach which family social workers can help parents to learn (Collins et al., 2010). Considering that there are no comprehensive social work strategies for improving the living conditions of offshore employees and solving their family problems, as well as due to the subjective nature of this issue and the need to regard profoundly into this category, the use of qualitative research method with the pattern of naturalism is required, Therefore purpose of the present study was to extract social work practical solutions for the family under the conditions of men's employment in offshore oil industry.

Methodology

The current study was part of a qualitative research the findings of which are the results of content analysis, continuous comparison of data and focus group. In order to achieve the determined objective of the study, participating subjects were selected through purposive sampling and this process continued until data saturation was achieved. The present study was conducted on a total number of 28 subjects, all of whom were offshore employees in the oil and gas production areas of Assaluyeh, Khark, Siri and Lavan and a number of wives, managers and experienced social and psychology experts in the field of offshore work. Furthermore to enriching the data, a focus group was formed with 8 participation of social work and psychology experts. Having at least 5 years of work experience for the employees and experts at offshore and a minimum managerial experience of 4 years for the managers were the main inclusion criteria. Additionally, type of employment, place of work and residence, age, number of children, age of children, and wife's employment were, also, considered in order to observe the maximum variation of participants in selecting the employees. Required data was collected through open semi-structured interview. The research environment used for interviewing the employees and some experts from oil companies operating areas included company headquarters and counseling centers, in contract with oil companies that families had visited. The implementation of the study covered the period between October 2016 to August 2017. Each interview took 34 to 92 minutes, based on the willingness of the participants, recorded on a digital device. Personal and general questions, as well as open questions along with the purpose of the research, were used to collect required data from the interviews. In an interview with offshore employees and their wives, open questions were inquired such as 'How have you been compatible with the offshore work Schedule in family life over the past few years?' and 'What do you do to solve family problems?' Also in interviewing experts, questions such as 'What do you do as a social worker/consultant for families?', 'What solutions do you recommend as an expert to families that refer to you?' and 'How should social work practices techniques for these families?' were inquired to expand the interview process and clarify the subject, topic, and objectives gradually; follow-up and exploratory questions were presented based on the data provided by the participants.

The audio file was carefully transcribed and the text was reviewed several times after each interview in order to analyze the data. Meaning units were specified and condensed with a close-to-text description. Then, a list of codes was prepared, revised and reviewed based on meaning, similarities and differences were determined in meaning, and similar codes were replaced by reduction and induction method in a more abstract level; subcategories and acceptable categories were obtained through continuous comparison. MAXQDA software version 10 was used to facilitate the process of coding, listing, categorizing, repeated comparing of different data and retrieving quotes in the data analysis process.

Credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability methods were used to ensure trustworthiness of collected data. Attempts were made to spend sufficient time collecting and reviewing data, using variety in sampling (selecting participants with different demographic characteristics), giving interview feedbacks to participants, and confirming the categories obtained from the interview texts to ensure the credibility of the data. In order to achieve stability, dependability method of the findings was used, so that the handwritten interviews were presented to the faculty members familiar with qualitative research for analysis and revision in order to ensure the

dependability of the content and the results; the research findings were presented to people in similar situations for comment to determine transferability. In addition to obtaining necessary permissions, sufficient explanation of the importance and objectives of the investigation, the confidentiality of specifications and information, permission of the use of voice recordings, the absence of any compulsion or threat to participate and the power of withdrawal at any stages of the investigation were given to each qualified participant in order to observe ethical considerations.

Findings

The data of the present study was the result of analyzing the content of the interviews performed with 28 participants, including 18 offshore employees, 3 wives, 5 social workers and psychologists and 2 managers; all participants were married. Four main categories entitled “Training and informing”, “Consulting services”, “Strengthening social participation and support”, “Intervention in specific situations” were extracted from the analysis of the collected data; there have been formed a total number of 13 sub-categories (Table 1).

Table 1: Social work practical strategies for the families of offshore employees

Main Categories	Sub-Categories
Training and informing	Work and Life management
	Problem solving skills
	Interaction and Relationship Skills
	Parenting skills
Consulting services	Strengthening the psychological capital
	Optimize the response to roles
	Marital counseling
	Reducing stress and anxiety
Strengthening social participation and support	Development of social activities
	Improve the bonds of kinship
Intervention in specific situations	Home visit and communicate with families
	Crisis intervention
	Address the issues of children's education

Training and informing: According to extracted concepts, social workers could be helpful through using the strategy of training and informing of couples in scope of problem-solving skills, parenting, effective communication and management of work and life for alleviate or Solve problems related to child care, challenge in family relationships, disturbing interactions outside the family, and conflict between family and work roles.

Concerning the need to train employees and their families, one the managers stated:

“The basis of everything is education. Training and informing should be presented more than before. Life-training, living costs, children’s education and their employment are taken into account for families.” (Manager 1)

Regarding parenting training, an expert emphasized the need for couples to agree on the way of upbringing their children and stated:

“Upbringing children is one of the issues which husbands and wives need to reach an agreement on. In my opinion, in this regard, training should be given to the families of offshore employees. (Expert 4)

Another expert believed that in order to strengthen children’s sense of safety at home, preserving family order and stability is necessary during the absence of the father from home:

“Couples should try not to change the usual order of the family. Children feel safe and comfortable when they know the rules of family affairs are permanent; on the other hand, the husband and wife should try to maintain stability at home.” (Expert 5)

The wife of one of the offshore employees regarding how to invite her husband’s participation in upbringing their children during his absence from home stated:

“I have always behaved in a way so that my children would not feel the absence of their father from home. We had constant phone calls, and whenever the children were naughty, I would immediately call my husband and want him to talk with the children.” (Wife 2)

Concerning the proper management of work and family roles of offshore employees, an expert said:

“Individuals must learn the skills of proper role playing in the training courses; that is, they must have the right planning for their lives and their needs in order to be able to have an appropriate encounter at the time of men’s long-term absence from home.” (Expert 4)

Regarding the skills of interactions and relationships between wives and husbands, an employee pointed out factors such as not to take hard on one another, not to take issues seriously and to welcome different situations:

“My wife and I tried hard not to take hard on one another. I did not achieve what I liked in my life, but I have had to adapt to the harsh conditions so far. We attempted not to make a big deal out of the issues. I tried to pay more attention to my wife and children and take care of their affairs in the 14 days I was home and tried to behave well as far as I could.” (Employee 3)

An expert concerning the need for learning to solve problems and conflicts by family members expressed:

“However, learning conflict and problem solving skills is also regarded as a solution. As we can see, families are getting smaller; cities and urban life have increased the role responsibilities and made everyone obsessed with hardships of life; therefore, it would be difficult for the wife to ask help from others in the absence of her husband and has to be self-supporting which requires learning new skills. Considering these issues, wives have to learn independent problem-solving skills.” (Expert 1)

Consulting services: Social worker in the role of a consultant, attempts to strengthen psychological capital which includes the increase of optimism, resiliency and self-efficacy of family members, as well as optimizing spouses’ responses to roles and changing attitudes toward family duties, increasing couples’ knowledge of satisfactory sexual intercourse and reducing stress and anxiety.

Regarding the necessity of couples’ resiliency and self-efficacy in case of men’s off-shore working conditions, an employee made a comment:

“Individuals should tolerate homesickness; whether to be men or women, they should cope with their own jobs, otherwise they will encounter troubles both at home and even in their own affairs.” (Employee 4)

An expert emphasized the need for women’s self-efficacy and increasing life skills in such kinds of situations:

“If women do not have adequate self-efficacy, the family’s problems will increase; therefore, women’s independence and being able to stand on their own are of paramount significance, to attain which, their life skills have to increase.” (Expert 2)

Regarding the need to optimize responses to roles, the wife of one of the offshore employees concerning her positive experiences and the appropriate ways of responses by rotational employees’ wives to their roles, so that the authority of men at home and in the children’s eyes would not diminish, stated:

“My recommendation to women who have rotational husbands is not to assume that by their husbands’ absence from home, they are left alone; they had better keep contact with their husbands during the absence, and ask their opinions in different affairs and be in harmony with each other, so that their children will not feel their father’s absence and have peace.” (Wife 3)

The above-mentioned expert noted the importance of preserving the husband’s authority by the wife in family and considered it as a basis for children’s proper modeling after the father as a competent person and acquiring psychological sense of safety by children; in this regard he stated:

“Spouses should behave in a way that children would not realize all the authority is in the hands of the mother. There should be an agreement between the husband and wife concerning the issues when even she deems her husband’s answer positive, she had better call her husband and pretend to ask him permission in front of the children and let the authority of the father preserve at home.” (Expert 4)

A manager regarding the role of social work consultation in reducing individuals’ stress stated:

“Social workers and consultants can teach individuals some techniques and give families consultations which will make the employees feel more relaxed and less stressful.” (Manager 2)

Strengthening social participation and support: Based on the findings of this study, increasing social participation through the development of social activities of individuals such as the formation of self-help groups is a proper way to prevent employees and their families in isolation and social alienation. The existence of social support is a highly important source both scopes of work and family that can reduce the negative effects of occupational and family stressors. Furthermore improving relationships with relatives and living in the vicinity of the parents’ family will increase the opportunities for support in times of emergency, the result of which could be the reduction of family life pressures for offshore employees.

A discussion in this scope was formed in the focus group, indicating that:

“The social work unit provides support communities for offshore of employees wives, connecting the families of offshore employees together, and creating friendship opportunities, empathy, seminar, and help with each other’s experience.” (Focus group)

An employee regarding the role of parental family support in reducing the pressures of everyday life for his wife stated:

“My absence from home caused my wife and my children to live with my parents for a while. After a while that my wife was away from my father’s family, stresses and hardships increased for her since they used to help her in some home affairs and caring for the children.” (Employee)

The wife of another employee spoke about feeling not lonely with her parents’ family at the time of her husband’s absence: *“...but in the early days of my married life I did not have much problem with this, because at times when my husband was at work, I was with my parents’ family; therefore, I did not feel her absence much ...” (Wife 1)*

Intervention in specific situations: The availability of social workers for offshore employees’ families is essential as they could be the coordinator of providing services at the time of emergency to solve some of their problems. Assistance and intervention in times of incidents and illness, visiting their home with the aim of reducing stress in times of crisis, strengthening family members’ morale, examining the details of their interactions, as well as following school issues and the educational failure of children are included in the scope of Social workers’ intervention.

“Facilitating the availability of social work and consulting services by providing infrastructure, launching a telephone line that families could communicate with the social work unit in urgent cases, addressing their issues of health, education, and addiction of a family member and attending the disable members are among the cases where social working could support families.” (Focus group)

A manager concerning this issue stated:

“In the accidents or issues that happen to the family members, social workers can monitor in case they need to be treated; also they can coordinate with the legal officials of the company and help in their judicial and police work.” (Manager 2)

An expert described his intervention experience in the family as follows:

“I had two telephone lines during the day and night for a while; I had phone calls when issues would happen and I was linked with the consulting doctor and travel affairs with whom I would coordinate and support the families. Of course, this was for a short period of time; I was the head of crisis management at the time and social workers were the coordinators between various units of social services.” (Expert 2)

Discussion

Based on the results of the present study, which was conducted with the purpose of identifying practical social work solutions, four main categories, including ‘training and informing’, ‘consulting services’, ‘strengthening social support and participation’, and ‘intervention in particular situations’, were conceptualized and abstracted by analyzing the data. (Table 1)

Training and informing individuals are the important roles of social workers in order to enable them to become independent in solving their problems; therefore, according to the data found in this research, social workers can train and inform employees and their family members in the fields of parenting, problem-solving skills, managing work and life, and interactions and relationships skills. In this regard, Collins and Jordan (2010) stated that, in the family training approach, child management techniques and parenting methods are the skills family social workers could assist parents to learn (Collins et al., 2010). According to their research findings, Zargham Borujeni et al. (2013) suggested that appropriate interventions should be undertaken to enhance their ability to cope with child anxiety in rotational employees, and oil companies with rotational employees should have training and support strategies to reduce the impact of the father’s absences (Zargham et al., 2013).

Providing consulting services to the families of offshore employees is regarded as another way which a social worker uses to counteract the psychological pressures of family members and strengthen their psychological capital and reduce their stress and anxiety. Consistent with this result, the research findings of Avey, Reichard, Luthans, and Mhatre (2011) have indicated that each of the four components of psychological capital has a positive relationship with a variety of behavioral, functional, emotional and cognitive variables which are essential for human development and excellence (Avey et al., 2011). Siu (2013) also stated that, research evidence indicates the relationship between psychological capital components and the dynamic interaction between work and family (Siu, 2013). How to optimize responses to family roles and change attitudes toward traditional duties are regarded as basic roles of social worker consultation that should be taken into regard in dealing with family roles and marital problems due to the frequent absence of men from home. In line with the findings of the present study, Forsyth and Gauthier (1991), Gallegos (2006) the development of couples’ strategies for managing situation and transferring leadership roles and decision making on parenting issues are considered as essential subjects in the families of offshore employees and refusing to accept these strategies by couples poses tension in the family (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991, Gallegos, 2006).

The social worker by working with the family of offshore employees in the direction of strengthening social participation and support as an adaptive source in dealing with tension factors of work and family attempts to maintain mental health of individuals. In line with this approach, the results of Chen, Wei-Qing, Wong, Sun (2008) study indicated that social support could be effective in the health and work stress control of offshore oil employees (Chen et al., 2008). With review studies of Matthews, Bulger and Barnes-Farrell (2010), Cortese, Colombo and Ghislieri (2010). Blanch, Aluja (2012), Seiger and Wiese (2009) on social support, work and family, the results indicate that the lack of social protection in both areas of work and family is attributed to higher levels of incompatibility and conflict between work and family roles (Matthews et al., 2010; Cortese et al., 2010; Blanch & Aluja, 2012; Seiger & Wiese, 2009) and the importance of strengthening social protection for families becomes more evident.

Intervention in particular situations could mean the occasions when the family is experiencing a problem or incidents and needs to receive on time social care services. In these cases, the social worker has the role of an assist coordinating with other organizational units such as health and social services for team intervention. In this regard, Yeager, Roberts (2015) state that social worker, during the family intervention period, focuses on decision-making and problem-solving issues, and his purpose is to help the family to acquire appropriate adaptive skills. He not only deals with the problem, but also examines the causes of the problem and investigates the long-term effects of the crisis on the family functioning (Yeager & Roberts, 2015).

Conclusion

The families of the offshore employees are encountered with challenges in personal and social dimensions, in playing spousal and parenting roles, interactions and relationships within and outside the family, and in fulfilling life affairs due to men's intermittent absence from home. Consequently, in order to confront the family's issues, the social work profession can play an important role in the survival and improvement of family life of offshore employees through using strategies of training and informing, consulting services, strengthening the ground of increasing participation and social support, as well as intervening in the family affairs in urgent situations.

Acknowledgments

Hereby, the authors thank and appreciate all people who participated in the present research.

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