

The social condition of a cohort of peasant farmers in rural community in southwest Nigeria

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Summary

This study focused on the psychosocial condition of a cohort of rural farmers, highlighting the social condition of their children, their life style, life events in the past year, the extent of their involvement in farming, the sufficiency of material sustenance from their products, their unmet needs and social aspirations, difficulties encountered in farm work, satisfaction with farming, and psychological distress. In 1992, 186 farmers were interviewed during health education visits at farm villages in Idere town, Oyo State. There were 161 (87%) males and 25 (13%) females mean age 49.9 (sd 11.7) years: who were illiterate, mainly polygamous, with 4-6 children per household. Only two families had a child each in institutions of higher learning. The general picture that emerged was that of a peasant, hardworking (six-day per week) farmer who relaxes with a game of cards in the evenings. His greatest problem is that of transportation and hiring extra hands for work. He is impressed by the yield from his farm. Compared with urban junior civil servants, the farmers had significantly lesser life events and GHQ-12 (psychological symptoms) scores. They had unmet social needs and were not satisfied with their condition of living. Meeting some of the basic needs of these farmers will boost their morale, enhance yield, and lower prices of food for the general population.

Résumé

Cet étude traite de la condition psychosociale d'une Cohorte de cultivateurs ruraux, tout en faisant la lumière sur la condition sociale de leurs enfants, le genre de vie des paysans, les événements survenus dans leur vie les années précédentes, le degré de leur engagement dans leur activités agricole, l'approvisionnement en matériel d'entretien à partir de leurs produits, leurs besoins et aspirations sociale, les difficultés rencontrés l'ors de leurs travaux agricole, la satisfaction par rapport à l'agriculture et les dommages psychologique. En 1992, 186 paysans ont été interviewés pendant des visites d'éducation pour la sante, dans des villages de cultivateurs au tour de Idere, état d'Oyo, Nigeria. Ils étaient 161 (87%) males et 25 (13%) femelles. Moyenne d'age 49.9 (sd 11.7) ans, illettrés, polygame pour la plupart, avec 4 à 6 enfants par foyer. Seuls deux familles, avait chacun un enfant dans des grandes institutions educative. L'image générale qui en ressort, est celui du paysan; grand travailleur (6-7 Jours par semaine), qui se distrait avec les jeux de carte dans les soirées. Son probleme majeur, est celui du moyen de locomotion, et d'une main d'oeuvre plus abondante. Il est impressionné par les produits de son champs. Comparés aux fonctionnaires de la basse classe vivant dans les villes, il ya un très légère difference significative dans les événements survenue dans leur vie, et leurs GHQ-12 (symptomes psychologiques). Ces paysans ont des besoins sociaux, et ne sont pas satisfait de leur condition sociale. Résoudre certains problèmes sociaux de ces paysans remontera leur morale, accroira la production et diminuera le prix des denrées alimentaires à la grande majorite de la population.

Introduction

Although governments in Nigeria routinely acknowledge the needs for improvement in agricultural production, especially in annual budgetary speeches and recognize the invaluable contribution of rural small-scale and peasant farmers areas in feeding the nation, there is paucity of systematic enquiry into the social condition of the rural areas where these farmers live. Typically, these areas have no electricity, pipe borne water, or good roads. In the old Ibarapa Division (Southwest Nigeria) where, for over three decades, the medical school of the University of Ibadan has been engaged in community based medicine, literature has been produced on aspects of health care delivery in such communities [1]. In recent reports, our group has highlighted the extent of psychiatric morbidity and psychoactive substance use problems among 335 children, 865 adults, and 425 pregnant women (all engaged in farming) attending primary health care (PHC) facilities in this local government area [2,6]. Yet, in all these studies, little or no attention has been paid to the specific social circumstance of being a farmer in these rural areas. This apparent scientific neglect of a group, whose products are so essential to the nutritional needs of the nation, is unwarranted. Apparently, in acknowledgement of the need to focus attention on the condition of farmers within the context of the current primary health care (PHC) revolution, WHO has accorded an important place to adequate food production. Also UNICEF is currently targeting household food sufficiency as a prerequisite to any meaningful pursuit of health and social well-being [8].

This study focused on the psychosocial condition of a cohort of rural farmers with a view to highlighting the social condition of their children, the life style of the farmers (e.g., when they wake up and return from work), life events in the past year, their extent of involvement in farming, the sufficiency of material sustenance from their products, their unmet needs and social aspirations, difficulties encountered in farm work, satisfaction with farming, and psychological distress.

Subjects and method

The subjects consisted of 186 farmers in Idere farm villages, Ifelolu Local Government Area, Oyo State. As guinea worm is endemic in this area, the Medical School of the University of Ibadan runs a health education programme on this and other diseases in the area. It was on such health education visits that the subjects were interviewed, at a central location in the town, where health education talks were delivered. In other words, this study was not based on a house-to-house survey.

The community is disposed in hamlets, without pipe borne water or electricity, in the real traditional culture where the ideals of the African extended family system have not yet been disrupted by the encroaching modernity of the larger country. Working with knives and hoes on the southern fringes of sahel Sudan, they cultivate the staple foods of cassava, yams, maize, millet, and a variety of vegetables. Free education, with emphasis on primary and secondary schools, primary health care, and a dispensary (with a maternity unit)

are now available within about a five kilometre radius, although literacy rates remains low and traditional healers are highly patronized.

All subjects were interviewed by one indigenous staff of the health centre, who had had previous experience in interviewing people for psychiatric research in the locality. In order to avoid duplication, those interviewed were heads of households and where the male head of the household was not available, the eldest wife of the household was interviewed. They were recruited for interview on the days when the health education team visited the area. Such visits are usually pre-arranged, with the cooperation of community leaders so that all adults would usually attend the meeting. Although this method of sampling would seem biased in favour of only those interested in attending health education meetings, the practical reality is that, over the years, these meetings have been popularized so that community leaders do ensure that the meetings are well attended. In addition, the popularity of these is ensured by the fact that guinea worm is a major problem for which the people desire assistance [1]. Interviews were conducted in private after the aims of the study had been explained. Over a 1-month period, all the heads of households who attended the health education meetings were interviewed. As expected in such a traditional culture where approval had been obtained from community leaders, there were no refusals. The questionnaire (available from the authors on request) consisted of the following: (1) socio-demographic characteristics; (2) the status of children, i.e., level of education, employment, health condition, and participation in farm work; (3) type of training received for farm work; (4) involvement in farm work e.g., number of locations and acreage of farmland, engagement in supplementary occupations (i.e., hunting, petty trading, etc); (5) income from farm work, e.g., yield of crops, monthly income; (6) sufficiency of income to meet material needs (yes/no, responses); (7) unmet needs, i.e., what subject needs but is unable to provide (yes/no responses); (8) lifestyle, e.g., hours of work, means of transportation, leisure activities; (9) seven life events in the past year, e.g., loss of first degree relations (yes/no responses); (10) 14 difficulties encountered with work in the past year, e.g., transportation, security of farm produce, hiring labour (little or none/some/a lot of difficulty, responses); (11) feeling of satisfaction with farm work (no/occasionally/most times responses); (12) perceived harmful effect of farming on health and social life (no, occasionally/ most times responses); and (13) the 12-item Goldberg's General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) [9].

In the development of the questionnaire, the draft was examined for validity by a psychiatrist, the community physician in charge of the medical school's programme in the area, and an indigenous primary health care worker in the area. From their comments, adjustments were made, and a Yoruba version produced by the method of back-translation. The Yoruba version was then pre-tested for validity and ease of application by being used to interview three farmers in different villages in the locality.

The interviewer (an indigenous health staff with previous experience) received a 1-week period of training in the use of the questionnaire, and the study commenced when we were satisfied that he could reliably read out the items in Yoruba and rate the responses.

Data were analyzed by frequency counts and cross-tabulations, with *t* tests (two-tailed), chi-square test (with Yates' correction where necessary) and Pearson's correlation, at the 5% level of statistical significance.

It has not been possible to provide full data for a control group because any other professional group (e.g., junior worker in government or private companies) would have had higher literacy levels, would have lived in a different socioeconomic setting, and therefore, be more sophisticated.

Nevertheless, when we attempted to apply an appropriate version of the questionnaire to workers in a large multinational company, the authorities objected to many of the items on the grounds that they could undermine staff loyalty (e.g., aspect relating to sufficiency of pay etc). However, we have data from another recent study of junior workers at the University College Hospital, and at the Oyo State Ministry of Health, Ibadan (in the same state as the farmers), in which the workers were interviewed with similar 7-item life events scale and the GHQ-12 [10]. Data from these workers will be compared with those of the farmers.

Results

Subjects were interviewed over a 1-month period in late 1992. These were 161 (86.6%) males and 25 (13.4%) females, aged 22-75 years, mean age 49.9 (sd 11.7). The mean age of the males, 50.8 (sd 11.6), was significantly higher than that of the females, 44.4 (sd 10.9) ($P < 0.001$). In the main, they had had no formal education, and consisted of christians (41.96%), muslims (52.7%), and traditional religionists (5.4%). They were typically from polygamous homes, and 78% of them had 4-6 children in the household (Table 1). Table 1 shows that the younger children were generally in primary and secondary schools in the locality, while the older ones were engaged in semi-skilled work (e.g., car mechanic, bicycle repairing, etc). Generally, the farmers were accompanied to work by their children. Only two families had a child each in institutions of higher learning, and families with children in senior employment positions were rather rare.

Table 1: Condition of the children

	N	%
<i>No of children alive</i>		
No of subjects with 1-3 children	33	17.7%
No of subjects with 4-6 children	145	77.9%
No of subjects with 7-8 children	6	3.2%
<i>Educational level of children</i>		
No of subjects with at least 2 children in primary school	144	77.4%
No of subjects with at least 1 child in secondary school	108	58.1%
No of subjects with at least 1 child in higher institutions	2	1.1%
<i>Occupation of children</i>		
No of subjects with children in semi-skilled apprenticeship e.g. mechanic	47	25.3%
No of subjects with children in semi-skilled work	28	15.1%
No of subjects with children as junior civil servants	6	3.2%
No of subjects with children as senior civil servants	3	1.6%
No of subjects with children working only as farmers	4	2.2%
No of subjects regularly accompanied to work by children	15	61.8%
<i>Health conditions of children</i>		
No of subjects with children having chronic physical illness	1	0.6%
No of subjects with children having chronic mental illness or deviant behaviour	1	0.6%

They learnt farming vicariously, simply by following parents to work in childhood. The in-put of government agricultural extension officers, whose duty it is to advise rural farmers, was not acknowledged by any respondent. They were really small-scale farmers, with over three-quarters of them having two to four acres of farmland in one location. However, a number of them supplemented their earning through related activities, such as hunting and petty trading (Table 2).

The general picture that emerged (Table 2) was that of a peasant who woke as soon as he heard the muslim call for prayers (about 5 am), worked till the call for evening prayers at about 4 pm, (with 30 minutes breaks for lunch at the farm) and who follows this routine for at least six days in the week. In the evenings, he relaxes with his mates playing some native

game of cards or arranging for aspects of work the next day (Table 2). As Table 3 shows, the greatest difficulty he encounters is transportation (80% of respondents) and the

Table 2: Extent of involvement in farm work

	N	%
<i>How learnt farming</i>		
Learnt farming by accompanying parents to work	178	95.7%
Was sent to a farmer to live with	1	0.5%
Just found myself farming without formal training	5	2.7%
Learning from visiting govt. officials	-	-
<i>Location/size of farming this season</i>		
No of subjects with 1 location of farmland	143	76.9%
No of subjects with 2 locations of farmland	35	18.8%
No responses	8	4.3%
About one acre of farmland cultivated	19	10.2%
No of subjects cultivating 2-4 acres of farmland	159	85.5%
<i>Sources of extra income</i>		
No of subjects who hunt for animals (hunters)	23	12.4%
No of subjects engaged in petty trading	31	16.7%
No of subjects engaged in guard duties	25	13.4%
No of subjects in labourer occupations	10	5.4%
No of subjects engaged in contract work	2	1.1%
No of subjects engaged as businessmen	4	2.2%
No of subjects engaged in traditional healing	3	1.6%
<i>Time spent at work/life style</i>		
No of subjects working 6 days per week	129	69.4%
No of subjects who work everyday	57	30.6%
No of subjects who wake up when muslim calls for morning prayer	118	63.4%
No of subjects who go to work on foot	176	94.6%
No of subjects who reach home during evening call for prayers	149	80.1%
No of subjects who have period of rest at work		96.2%
No of subjects who engage in leisure activities	186	100%

Table 3: Difficulties, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with farm work

Difficulties encountered with work in past 12 months (A lot of difficulty)	N	%
Transportation	148	79.8%
Hiring extra hands for planting	7	3.8%
Hiring extra hands for harvesting	59	31.7%
Acquiring land for farming	1	0.5%
Keeping thieves away from farm	1	0.5%
Crop failure	4	2.2%
Low crop yield	6	3.2%
Poor financial returns from sale of crops	1	0.5%
Inadequate rains	1	0.5%
Crop pests	2	1.1%
<i>Satisfaction with farm work (most times)</i>		
Feel satisfied doing this work	3	1.6%
Would have preferred another job	61	32.8%
Feel weak to do this work	1	0.5%
Feel people respect you for this type of work	1	0.5%
Feel work is beneficial to community	2	1.1%
Are there joyful aspects of farm work (Yes)	12	8.5%
<i>Perceived adverse effects of farm work on self (most time)</i>		
Think this work caused harm to physical body	46	24.7%
Think work is strenuous	1	0.5%
Worry about doing this work for all my life	4	2.2%
People make adverse comments on my look (occasional/most times)	3	2.6%
<i>Area of living needing improvement</i>		
Improvement of crop yield	176	94.6%
Measures to improve water supply	176	94.6%
Improvement of security	176	94.6%
Improvement of sale of crops	176	94.6%
Improvement of general condition of life	174	93.5%

problem of providing security or acquiring land for farming;

nature (rains and pests) is fair on his work; and he has a ready market for his products, once he can overcome the transportation difficulty of getting them to the market. Although the work is not physically overdemanding, he only occasionally feels satisfied doing this work, as he does not feel that his profession brings him respect; and about one-third of respondents would have preferred another job. It is noteworthy that only 2 (1.1%) subjects felt that their work was beneficial to the community.

As Table 4 shows, he is impressed by the yield from his farm, he earns about five hundred naira (about US 2.00 at the official exchange rate) per month from the sale of his products; the harvest is sufficient to meet the mainly carbohydrate food needs of his family; and he rarely has commitments that would make him a debtor. However, he would have preferred to have had enough money to send his children to school for higher education (93% of respondents), build a satisfactory house, and purchase a bicycle or motor cycle for easier transportation

Table 4: Sufficiency of farm yields and unmet social needs

Rating of yield of crops in past two farming seasons	n	%
Moderately good	174	93.5%
Very good	11	5.4%
<i>Earning per month from sale of crops (range ₦200 - ₦800.00)</i>		
Median		₦550.00
Mode		₦500.00
No of subjects earning ₦600-₦800	46	24.7%
<i>Sufficiency to meet material needs</i>		
Harvest sufficient to meet food needs of family	162	87.1%
Money earned sufficient to meet financial commitments	161	86.6%
Needed to borrow money to meet commitment in past year	28	15.1%
Owing anybody a large sum of money	2	1.1%
<i>Unmet social needs</i>		
Unable to train child for higher education	172	92.5%
Unable to build a satisfactory house	185	95.5%
Unable to marry more wives (males only)	108	58.1%
Unable to buy bicycle or motorcycle	178	95.7%

Over 93% of respondents indicated their social condition would be improved by measures that addressed crop yield, transportation, sale of crops, water supply, and general conditions of life.

In the past year, they had few life events (range of scores, 0-2, mean 0.43, SD 0.23, out of a maximum of 7). GHQ-12 scores ranged from 0-4 (mean 0.24, SD 0.58, out of a maximum score of 12). Correlations were done among age, life events score, difficulties score, dissatisfaction score, and GHQ-12 score (see section on methodology for definition of above measures). The only significant correlations (Pearson's) were that the degree of satisfaction was negatively correlated with the degree of difficulties encountered in work ($r = -0.346$; $t = 5.0$; $P > 0.05$), while GHQ-12 score was also negatively correlated with the degree of satisfaction with work ($P < 0.05$).

Discussion

A major limitation of the study seems to be that the sample was not chosen from a house to house survey. The practical usefulness of our method of sampling has been described in the section on methodology. The lot of the peasant farmer highlighted here is probably similar to the social condition of many such groups in poor Third World countries. The rural farmer, who provides the bulk of the food consumed in the large urban areas (as agriculture is still largely not mechanized in these countries), is neglected by government in allocating

social amenities (e.g., electricity, pipe borne water, good roads, public transportation). It is the urban worker, whom the rural farmer feeds that gets these amenities. Our findings showed that the rural farmer is not satisfied with his near pristine conditions of living; and is not mindful of the need to improve the general condition of life. Many of them indicated that they would prefer more lucrative jobs if such were available. They have unmet social needs. Government plans at reaching them to help improve their yield (e.g., through agricultural extension workers) seems to have remained on the drawing board for our cohort. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that meeting some of the basic needs of these farmers (e.g., good roads, transportation) will boost their morale, enhance yield, and lower prices of food for the larger population. Their relatively low level of psychiatric morbidity is in keeping with the findings of our survey of PHC centres in the locality [2,6].

Comparing the data with that of another study [10], which involved 187 junior civil servants at the Ibadan metropolis, we found that the urban workers had significantly higher life events scores (0.92, sd 1.6), and GHQ-12 scores (0.81, sd 1.6) than the farmers ($P < 0.0001$).

On the surface of it, therefore, the rural farmer is living a more peaceful and contented life than his counterpart (i.e., junior worker) in the urban area, who works for most of the day and gets a monthly pay that is hardly able to pay his rent and other bills. This may partly explain the higher prevalence of hypertension among urban Africans compared with rural Africans [11]. The question is, what promise does the future hold for the rural farmer compared with the urban junior worker? Our data showed that the children of the rural farmers are in such a social condition that they are not likely to do better than their parents. On the other hand, the urban worker, because of his exposure, makes sacrifices to educate his children to higher levels, with the hope that things will get better in the future for the child who has acquired higher education. One complaint (as our data showed) is that the children help their parents on the farms. The benefits of improving the social condition of the farmers and their children would compensate for this in many other ways. There is, therefore, a need to study how to improve the social condition of rural farmers, without the accompanying disruption of the peace and stability of the area.

In conclusion, the farmers need to be given a sense of pride and appreciation for the all important work they are doing, apart from just ensuring that the agricultural extension

programme helps them in improving their farm yields and methods. This should help to improve the situation where only 2(1.1%) of the farmers actually knew or believed that their work is beneficial to the community at large.

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