Perception of Stress in Laotian Migrant Workers in Thailand

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Perception of Stress in Laotian Migrant Workers in Thailand

Kessarawan Nilvarangkul • Somporn Rungreangkulkij • Jaranya Wongprom

Abstract Globalization and the movement of workers across borders in search of a better life or employment are presenting healthcare systems and researchers with problems of increasing complexity. This study focused on how migrant workers in Thailand from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic conceptualized their stress and stressing factors. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and field notes were employed in the study, which analyzed data from seventy subjects through qualitative content analysis. The migrant workers in this sample perceived stress as a state of being unable to fulfill their preferences or expectations revolving around issues of: living with poverty, employment, loneliness, poor relationships, competition in the workplace combined with job uncertainty, and invisibility. To provide care for the minority migrant workers, nurses need to focus on identifying how these users perceive stress, and urgent action and further research are needed.

Keywords Stress • Migrant workers • Laotian • Thailand

Introduction

In 2004, the number of people from the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) migrating to Thailand increased markedly to between 1.5 and 2 million [1]. Of all the countries in the GMS, the Lao PDR shares the longest border with Thailand. Officially, the number of Laotian workers in Thailand in 2004 was 105,230 [2].

Living in a new country, people face difficulties and are confronted with a stressful experience. Stress is a natural part of life; however, people respond to it in different ways. Stressors are demands made by the internal or external environment that upset balance, thus affecting physical and psychological well-being, and requiring action to restore balance [3]. How people respond to stressors involves two factors including the person-environment relationship, and the person’s cognitive appraisal of the risks and benefits of the situation, which mediates or moderates the interpretation of its meaning [4]. Stressing factors from new environments, cultures, languages, foods, and conditions can be a challenge to any traveller; however, such stress takes on a different aspect when lived by a minority group, as represented by migrant workers in and across any culture.

Migration consists of a series of events, starting from pre-migration, selection for migration, the migration experience, and post migration. In each event, migrants face different stresses. For instance, Bhugra [5] implied in his work that when people undergo migration, they face difficulties in language, personality, and psychological stability during their migration experience. These can be combined with the loss of social support in the post-migration event, which reinforces the stresses of adaptation, discrimination, economic/material difficulties, and the lack of close ties to people or places. Berry [6] noted that people who live in a new culture face stress because of
having to change their cultural behaviour and thinking through contact with another culture. The experience of culture loss creates a high level of depression and uncertainty about how one should live in a new society, which causes people anxiety.

Studies revealed that living and working in a new culture caused people stress. For instance, people who lived and worked in a new country experienced depressive symptoms such as frustration and hopelessness [7, 8]. Additionally, almost 90% of Arab migrant women were psychologically stressed [9]. Other studies related to migrant workers in Thailand emphasized the difficulties of living and working. Studies that focused on identifying stress in Laotian migrant workers in Thailand were limited [10, 11].

This article presents the perception of stress in Laotian migrant workers as part of a larger study aimed to empower Laotian migrant workers to address their problems and enhance their health-related quality of life (HRQOL).

Methods
Participants and Recruitment

This study uses Action Research (AR) Methodology based on the concept of Lewin [12]. AR aims to facilitate social change or solve problems occurring in practice while generating new knowledge [13]. AR uses a cyclic approach [14] involving four steps, characterized by Lewin [13] as planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The study presents the preliminary stages of such research in its conceptual design stage. Purpose sampling was used to recruit seventy Laotian migrant workers working in several different employment locations in Thailand, where the use of migratory workers is a normal employment practice. Preliminary contact in recruiting volunteers was made through the Department of Labor from which the volunteers were drawn. Informed consent was sought and obtained from the volunteers after a formal presentation of the project in their native dialect. In this paper, the following references are provided for the participants: M = male, F = female, location 1 (L1) = small-scale cotton mattress production facility, L2 = rice mills, L3 = slaughterhouse, L4 = noodle-making factory, L5 = lumber mills, and L6 = nightlife venues.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews, participant observation, and field notes were used to collect data for 6 months. Audio recordings were used in this study. All 70 in-depth interviews took place at the actual workplaces. Participant observation was used to collect information throughout the research process, including during in-depth interviews and fieldwork. Field notes were used as a reflective journal and research data archive throughout the study.

Data Analysis

All taped interviews were transcribed into text verbatim. Content analysis was done with the aim of becoming immersed in [15] and familiar with the data. Manual analysis was used to study the raw data line-by-line, identify the significant statements in the information, and code the data. Clusters, followed by categories, were developed from the code. Then similar categories were linked together and the information confirmed with the workers [16].

Ethical Considerations

This study obtained approval from the ethics committee of the Khon Kaen University in Thailand (Ethical Research number HE 480756). Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Confidentiality, anonymity, the right to withdraw from the study without giving a reason, and ensuring no harm comes to the participants in the study were also considered in the project.

Findings

The data indicated that the majority of the workers perceived stress as “Dukkha” (suffering), a Buddhist concept arising from the noble truths of Buddhism. “Dukkha” was the state in which the workers were because they have not been able to master their desire and attachment to material objects [17]. As a result, they were suffering from sadness, unhappiness, worries, loneliness, frustration, and sleeplessness. The number and percentage of the issues that caused stress are shown in Table 1.

Several stressing factors were identified from the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressors</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living with poverty</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-standard wages and having limited choices</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse by employers and local people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distrusting their spouses</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition in the workplace and job uncertainty</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible persons</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Living with Poverty

Laotian migrant workers experienced stress because they were very poor, with no money to buy their own houses and lands. Consequently, debt was a major concern; obtaining money to pay for the treatment of an injury or illness, medicines, and education was also a major worry. In some cases their poverty was such that they lived at existence levels, feeding their family members only with food from the forest such as bamboo shoots, fish, and insects. One worker said:

Working hard all day, I sometimes felt stressed and suffer. I spend very little money in Thailand since I am afraid that I will run out of money and have no money to send to my children and wife in Lao PDR (M,L1).

A female worker reflected:

When I called home, my children told me that they wanted new school uniform for when school starts. I told them to use the old one. I am very torment indeed that I have not enough money to buy new clothes for them (F,L1).

Non-Standard Wages and Having Limited Choices

Most migrant workers’ personal histories revealed that formal education in their own countries was not an option for them. As a result, most are unskilled in jobs other than manual work. This lack of formal education, however, is not an indication of insufficient intelligence and abilities to communicate their wishes feelings and desires for themselves and their families. Nevertheless, the lack of formal job skills limited the types of jobs that were open to them; thus, they often have to accept any offer of paid employment and consider themselves fortunate to find paid employment in Thailand. Some expressed dissatisfaction since they earned less than standard wages. Others expressed frustration because they perceived their work environments to be health hazards, dangerous because of the frequent occurrence of accidents or illness. They wanted to find a new job but did know how. For instance, one worker said:

I have to carry heavy lumber on my shoulder and walk on narrow piece of one long small wood to take lumber into a truck. It is dangerous and I have to be very careful. Some fall from it and are injured (M,L5).

Another said:

Thai people do not want to do my job since they are afraid of illness. They told me that it was dangerous to work in this factory. I am afraid too but I have no choice … it is very difficult for me to find a job. I don’t know how to find a new job (F,L1).

Loneliness

Several workers who migrated to Thailand got a job and earned money for their families. Although the workers had a similar language and culture to the Thai (Isan) people and were able to communicate with Thai citizens, they still feel loneliness. Living far away from home, they had no loved one they could trust and talk to about personal issues, or share general activities with. They also lacked a loved one who would care for them, such as by cooking and washing their clothes, especially when they or someone in their families became ill. Some workers reflected:

Working in Thailand, I feel very lonely. I miss my children and my wife in Lao PDR.

When I stayed in Lao PDR, in the evening every member in our family had dinner and talked to each other. In Thailand in the evening I stay here alone. I have no one to talk to. I miss my home very much but I cannot go back now (F,L1).

Abuse by Employers and Local People

A few workers had poor relationships with their employers and the Thai people in the village. They experienced stress since they were physically abused by their employers. Other workers were verbally abused. Migrant workers were often pushed to work overtime without payment. Some workers felt unsafe to live or conduct activities in Thailand. A male migrant worker said: “My employer is very cruel. One time he hit me since I was tired and wanted to stop working” (M,L1). Others reported: “My employer has never hit me but he scolds on me very often”; “My employer pushed me to work until dark but he had never paid me overtime wages” (M,L1).

Distrusting Their Distant Spouses

A few male workers who left their wives in the Lao PDR admitted feeling stress because they were worried about whether their wives were faithful to them or not, as the following quote reveals: “When I think about my wife in Lao PDR, I am sometimes a bit worried about her behavior. I am not sure that she might have affair or not but I have to trust her. I always ask my cousins about her” (M,L3).
Competition in the Workplace and Job Uncertainty

Salary is usually linked to productivity; workers are competitive with themselves and other workers, especially in the small-scale cotton mattress production facilities. A worker said:

When a family wakes in the early morning, all families wake up too. Our work depends on our productivity; it is not about daily or monthly wages. If we start working late and other workers work early, sometimes no more material are left. Therefore, we cannot earn money (M,L1).

Some workers experience stress due to job uncertainty. Some workers responded:

We are worried that we may lose our job since our job depends on order and material...in the rainy season, cotton mattress demands very low and the employers do not pay us any money. It is also very difficult to find cotton at the moment since some people use synthetic mattress instead of cotton mattress and not many people plant cotton trees (F,L1).

Invisible Persons

One male migrant worker whose parents came and worked in Thailand more than 20 years and was born in Thailand. He is neither a Thai nor a Laotian citizen. Thailand does not have a law stating that a child born in Thailand to foreign parents is automatically eligible for Thai citizenship. His parents also could not register him as a Laotian since they had no document to prove that they were Laotians. A male worker who was working in Thailand went back to the Lao PDR to report himself to his government and be counted in an ongoing census. However, the Lao PDR government did not record him as its citizen. As a result, this worker has neither Thai nor Laotian citizenship either. A male worker said:

I feel bad about not being registered in Thailand or Laos. I feel very inferior and insecure. I cannot buy anything for myself. I have to use my Thai friend’s rights to buy things such as a motorcycle (M,L1).

Discussion

Laotian workers perceived their stress as the condition of not being able to fulfill their goals and hopes, which thus made them suffer. This is similar to Dolan’s [18] definition of stress as being a nonspecific response to all the demands made. Additionally, the migrant workers’ perception of suffering in this study is congruent with the Buddhist teaching that people suffer because they are attached to things or events that lead to negative thoughts and catastrophes [17]. They also lacked opportunities to access information or organizations for assistance. These findings are similar to those in other migrant studies; for example, Greenlee and Lantz (1993, cited in Lever et al. [19]) studied an Appalachian population living in poverty and demonstrated that poverty caused stress. Hammack, Robinson, Crawford, and Li [20] carried out a study among urban African-American adolescents and revealed that young African-American females who were poor were subject to depressive moods.

To be part of a community that sustains the individual is a human need. In this study, loneliness as well as loss of family contact and communication featured highly as stressing factors for the migrant workers, compounded by difficulties of integrating into the Thai communities in which they worked. This finding is in consistent with Asakura and Murata [21], and Bhattacharya [7], who found that people living in a different culture were stressed and felt loneliness. Abusive conditions and employers, and increased alcohol usage resulting in family or domestic violence are all grounded in poverty. Living in poverty, which dehumanizes the individual, leaves people disadvantaged and voiceless without any representation [22, 23].

Harsh and dangerous employment conditions that used productivity as the means to assess wages, which were at sub-standard rates, created competition, which in turn isolated individuals and prevented them from forming relationships with other migrant workers [24]. Many were without nationhood or rights due to national politics [25].

Conclusion

Migrant workers are subjected to difficult conditions that impact their well-being. There are no easy answers to the problems that have been identified; however, taking no action violates our humanity. Laws that control basic wages are in place and should be enforced. In the Thai context, healthcare providers need to urgently develop systems to support migrant workers’ quality of life.

Study Limitation

This study identified the stressing factors of Laotian migrant workers working in a local area of Thailand. Therefore, it is limited to the context in which it was developed. However, the results of the study can be adapted to workers in other contexts which have a similar situation to this study.
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References