

WORKING WITH VULNERABLE CHILDREN: STRESS FACTORS AND COPING STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED BY NGO WORKERS

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Abstract

Bolivia faces violence and poverty issues that negatively impact children and their development. In this context, professionals of local NGOs play a crucial role (Gallardo, 2022). However, prolonged exposure to stress can affect their well-being and also the quality of support for vulnerable children (Young et al., 2018). This research focuses on the difficulties of the local NGOs' professionals. This study focuses on sources of stress and coping strategies among professionals working for a child protection NGO in Tarija. To collect our data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 employees of this NGO. They also completed two psychometric questionnaires: the Coping Strategy Inventory (CSI), which measures stress levels on a three-level scale (Tobin et al., 1989), and the Perceived Stress Scale 14 (PSS-14), which assesses the type of coping strategies used (Cohen et al., 1983). Despite the small sample size, the thematic analysis shows that professionals are deeply committed to their jobs. The Bolivian collectivist culture acts as a protective factor, despite few resources. Indeed, all participants emphasized the importance of the support they get from colleagues. They require psychological help and additional personnel.

Keywords: Bolivia, local workers, stress, coping strategies, vulnerable children.

1. Introduction

In Bolivia, the city of Tarija has the highest reported rate of child abuse. Children often grow up in conditions marked by violence, poverty, and exploitation (Gallardo, 2022). This is why there is an urgent need to improve access to quality education, social protection, and healthcare. In this context, local NGOs working to protect children play a crucial role (UNICEF Bolivia, 2018). Nevertheless, these local NGOs receive fewer funds and resources than international ones (Tran & Abouassi, 2020). They face economic, human, and material challenges that can lead to professional situations in which local workers may experience stress that affects both their well-being and professional performance (Batti, 2014). Yet the sustainability of local NGOs is a significant challenge in ensuring support for vulnerable children (Young, Pakenham, & Norwood, 2018).

2. Methodology: Research objectives, instrumentation and sample

Our exploratory research used a mixed design to investigate the sources of stress and coping strategies among local NGOs professionals. We specifically focused on 13 Spanish-speaking workers employed by a child protection NGO in Tarija. To collect our qualitative data, we conducted semi-structured interviews that explored the institution's functioning, the motivation of professionals, their needs, the sources of stress they faced, and the coping strategies they adopted. We operated a thematic analysis of these data, following Braun and Clark's method (2016). Then, we used two psychometric tools: the 14-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14), which measures stress levels on a three-point scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), and the Coping Strategy Inventory (CSI), which assesses the type of coping strategies used (Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989). The PSS-14 has been validated in Spanish by Remor and Carrobes (2001), and the CSI by Cano-García, Rodríguez-Franco, & Garcia-Martínez (2007).

3. Results

3.1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

We deliberately composed our sample by including all the individuals who daily interact with the children: 12 women and one man, between 26 and 55 years of age (mean = 38; S.D. = 8.6). Among them, eleven have a university degree and work as a director (N = 1), teacher (N = 1), educator (N = 2), and psychologist (N = 7). The last two are the cooks: the first one achieved a primary school degree, and the other, a secondary school one. Their years of experience vary from 1 to 14. Among the eight married professionals, 7 have children. The other four are single, and only one of them has children. All of them are Bolivian.

3.2. Main results

The results of the interviews provide us with interesting insights into how the institution operates. The NGO has two implementations and provides support to children with familial and/or scholar issues (children who live in the streets, are victims of violence, neglect, are orphans, etc.). It is recognized as a shelter for young girl’s victims of abuse or violence, and a place that offers educational support to children. Each professional has their own role with their own tasks, and the team organises regular meetings to share information between members of the different implementations.

The collected data also show that our professionals are motivated by human values, such as commitment (N = 5), a desire to help (N = 5), and a sense of vocation (N = 2). Only one professional, a cook, is especially motivated by job stability. The participants mentioned work overload as a major source of stress (N = 10), but also reported other factors, such as unexpected events (N = 9), children’s difficult situations (N = 8), or unpredictable behaviours (N = 6).

The scores on the PPS-14 are summarized in Table 1 below. The total scores range from 0 to 56: the higher the score, the greater the stress. On average, our sample has a moderate level of stress (20.15). Psychologists have the lowest scores, which can be explained by their training in managing stressful situations. The director, who has the most responsibilities, has a very high score.

Table 1. Results of the PPS-14.

| | | <i>N</i> | <i>Professions</i> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Levels of PPS-14</i> | <i>Low (<20)</i> | 6 | 5 psychologists, 1 educator |
| | <i>Moderate (20 – 25)</i> | 4 | 2 psychologists, 1 teacher, 1 cook |
| | <i>High (>25)</i> | 3 | The director, 1 cook, 1 educator |

Regarding coping strategies, the thematic analysis of the interview contents reveals that all participants report mutual aid within their team (N = 13). They feel confident with their superiors, and they frequently get support from international volunteers. They regularly debrief with colleagues and feel understood. They jointly organize the planning and budget during their meetings, which enables seven participants to manage working pressure. To manage their emotion, eight underline the social support they receive from their families, while four prefer to take refuge in religious practice; only two highlight avoidance strategies. All mention a hobby as gardening, reading, or sports.

The CSI provides eight scores ranging from 0 to 20, each of which focuses on a type of coping strategy. Table 2 shows the three highest scores of the participants. These are consistent with the content of the interviews.

Table 2. Results of the CSI.

| | | <i>Mean of the sample (S.D.)</i> |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Type of coping strategies</i> | <i>Problem-solved</i> | 14 (5.9) |
| | <i>Cognitive restructuring</i> | 12.69 (4.68) |
| | <i>Social support</i> | 10.46 (5.15) |

Finally, participants indicate that they would need additional work power (N = 7) and greater psychological support (N = 3). Some of them also wish for more concrete needs, such as a pay raise (N = 1), better quality of the equipment (N = 1), and greater flexibility in meal preparation (N = 1).

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that if our participants are motivated by their desire to provide support to children, they also report several sources of stress, including workload, unexpected events, and situations affecting children. If they generally develop problem-focused coping strategies, such as being confident with their superiors or planning their tasks, they sometimes also apply emotion-focused coping strategies (social support) and avoidance. These results are consistent with those of Stevens, Sharma, and Skeoch (2022), who emphasize that colleagues are often the most effective source of support during stressful events. Their commitment to the institution positively influences their stress management, and the collectivist culture of Bolivian society is a protective factor (Fortes, Tian, & Huebner, 2020). Furthermore, all participants have a hobby that allows them to relax and reduce their stress (Bhui, Dinos, Galant-Miecznikowska, de Jongh, & Stansfeld, 2016). This research has several limitations. Because of the small sample size, we must interpret the findings with caution. Stress and coping strategies are an important domain of research. Therefore, further research could deepen the findings, explore the perspectives of other local NGOs, and include a larger number of participants. In conclusion, by giving professionals a voice, this research highlights the need to implement training programmes related to stress prevention in humanitarian contexts. Our findings also reveal that they need psychological support and additional personnel to ensure their well-being and the NGO's sustainability.

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