

Working with Wildlife: The Effect of Stressors and Resources on Burnout and Engagement for
Animal Caretakers

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Abstract

Employee stress can result in negative impacts both to the employee and to their organization. While all jobs are subject to stressors to some degree, certain occupations can face exceptional stressor levels or highly unique stressors because of the nature of the work. The proposed study aims to identify the common stressors for animal caretakers and the effects these stressors may have on employee engagement and burnout. The study will also examine the potential stress-buffering effects of personal and contextual resources. The project will examine common stressors that have been discussed in previous literature, as well as gain perspective on unique stressors to animal caretakers within zoos and aquariums. The study will specifically measure perceptions of environmental, social, and financial stressors within a sample of animal caretakers to determine the prevalence of each stressor and the relationship each stressor has with an employees' level of engagement, burnout, and turnover intentions. I expect that each stressor will be related to less engagement, more burnout, and more turnover intentions. I will also examine the extent that resources of safety culture, as well as work centrality modify the impact of stressors on burnout, engagement, and turnover intentions. I expect that safety climate and work centrality may buffer the employees from the negative effects of stressors. Results from this study can be used to inform employee interventions to counter stressors in this unique field.

Methodology

The present proposed study is designed to improve understanding of work-related stress experiences of animal caretakers. To do this, I will distribute a QuestionPro survey through multiple online networks for animal caretakers and through local organizations. Within the survey I will incorporate previously developed quantitative measures of stressors and resources which have been adjusted to fit the occupation more accurately. The survey will account for each of the common stressors that I expect to find within the field. Specifically, these stressors include environmental (revolving around the occurrence of physical exposure), social (revolving around interactions with customers and coworkers), and financial (revolving around perceived economic comfort). Gathering data on these stressors will help to determine the weight each plays on employees in relation to outcomes of engagement (level of vigor, dedication, and absorption toward work), burnout (occurrence of exhaustion and disengagement), and turnover intentions (how often employees think of leaving their job). I will also be including survey items that I believe contribute as moderators to the relationships between each stressor and outcome. These measures revolve around safety climate (bottom up approach to safety or the all-around safety atmosphere the employee is involved in), safety culture (top down approach to safety or what the organization expects) , and work centrality (how employees value their work role). In addition to the response scales, open-ended questions will be incorporated to capture both stressors and resources unique to the sample. The data obtained from the questionnaire will be analyzed using SPSS (multiple regression, ANOVA, PROCESS, and thematic analysis). Results will be able to provide a foundation for future research in the field while also working toward a focus for intervention application within industries currently.