Reviewer's report

Title: Job satisfaction and its modeling among township health center employees: a quantitative study in poor rural China

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Reviewer: Dag Hofoss

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There are three problems with this manuscript: the language is not good English, the paper does not address any specific hypotheses and the analyses are very straightforward (read: too straightforward).

The authors address an important subject: the job satisfaction of (172) township health center employees in rural China. The response rate is an impressive 90.5%. They document that staff is reasonably satisfied (83/100 = “somewhat satisfied”), but more so with their tasks and the content of their work than with their working conditions and their rewards. I believe that the authors are doing an important job by drawing attention to the plight of township health center employees, and that their results ought to interest Chinese rural health authorities – who, in the authors’ opinion (which I am quite willing to accept) have not been highlighting the job satisfaction of township health center employees in rural China and know little about the factors associated with it.

Academic readers may not find the article equally interesting. The presentation is highly descriptive. The authors make no attempt to link their observations to each other or to explanatory variables in new and exciting ways. First, they present single-variable scores (satisfaction items and dimensions) one by one. Then the eight job satisfaction dimensions are linked to province (Anhui or Xinjiang). Then general job satisfaction scores are presented the categories of a number of demographic variables, one by one. Finally, job satisfaction is related to the mentioned demographic background variables and to the (eight) dimensions of job satisfaction in a multiple regression analysis.

My interpretation is that this is what the authors really wanted to do (to provide a general picture, and not to test any detailed hypothesis/hypotheses). I would have preferred the latter. But it is the authors’ prerogative to decide the general outline of their article. It is not for the reviewer to challenge their decision by suggesting they revise their desire to write a descriptive article. I suggest no major, minor or discretionary revision of the general outline of the article. The manuscript stands or falls by the editorial policy on the question of descriptions.

The authors do not discuss whether the sociodemographic variables of their analyses provide the best explanations of the job satisfaction of township health center employees, they just imply that job satisfaction is a question of staff
demographic characteristics. Tacitly they discard the idea that it (also or alternatively) might have to do with the characteristics of the jobs. My view is they are barking up the wrong tree, and that job satisfaction cannot be fully explained by staff background. But again, that is the explanation they chose, and, again, I do not suggest they change it.

The dependent variables of the analysis are general job satisfaction and the eight dimensions of it, as produced by an exploratory factor analysis of data collected by a revised version of a consultant questionnaire used in a related project. The authors do not discuss the pros and cons of choosing a questionnaire made for the purpose of their project instead of a used and validated instrument (of which many exist, as job satisfaction is among the most extensively studied concepts of work sociology). The discussion of the factor analysis is also rather short. The proportion of variance accounted for is good. One (also good) Cronbach alpha is presented – but the reader is not told whether it is for the entire set of items or for one of the dimensions. And there is no discussion of the identified dimensions: their names are presented as if they were part of the computer output.

On this point, I suggest two minor essential revisions. 1) The authors should acknowledge the problems of constructing an ad hoc questionnaire instead of choosing among existing and validated instruments. 2) Also, and they should discuss the naming of the factors and the general picture of job satisfaction produces by their eight dimensions (what is covered, what may not be covered, how do they relate to published ideas about what constitutes job satisfaction).

The reference list documents that the authors did not start their project from scratch, many relevant research publications are listed. It is, however, not always clear how they are used, the authors rarely make explicit how they build on what is already known. At p 8 they refer to “Helzburge (1959)”. The reference does not reappear in the reference list. Should it read “Hertzberg”? It seems the authors are referring to his classic distinction between creating and maintaining motivation. If so, that may explain why they didn't find the exact reference and included it among the references.

Minor essential revision suggested: 3) locate the exact Helzburge/Hertzberg reference, add it to the reference list.

In the Conclusions section of the Abstract the authors say “Staff job satisfaction of THCs in poor areas seems to have been improved through implementation of the project”. They may well be right, but the statement is not supported by the analysis, which contains no information on before-and-after. As the authors say at p 9 (discussing “limits in our study”): “this was only a cross-sectional study … without baseline data to compare”.

Minor essential revision suggested: 4) Delete the above sentence from Abstract. Rewrite Abstract’s Conclusions section.

And all along there is the language question. I’m inclined to put up with much-less-than-perfect English, as I’m not a native English speaker myself. But
this is probably below the acceptable level. My first interpretation was that in this case one could stretch the limits. The manuscript is about an important topic and if it is published it can be brought to the attention of the Chinese health authorities with the extra weight of an internationally published report. But my next door Chinese colleague informs me that the authors are affiliated with well-reputed research institutions, which probably have the resources to have the manuscript rewritten into proper English.

Essential revision suggested: 5) Seek help from professional translator or colleagues more fluent in English to check entire manuscript (and the problem is the syntax, not the spelling).

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests