Reviewer's report

Title: What elements of the work environment are most responsible for health worker dissatisfaction in primary care rural clinics in Tanzania?

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Reviewer: Linda Fogarty

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This manuscript was well-written and generally of good quality. The authors do not clearly distinguish satisfaction and motivation as drivers of behavior and about also confuse performance quality and retention.

Please number your comments and divide them into:

- Major Compulsory Revisions

The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached. For example, additional necessary experiments or controls, statistical mistakes, errors in interpretation.

Background

1. Background second paragraph. I don’t understand the point of the paragraph related to the manuscript. The manuscript is not about motivation or quality. If there is an implication of the link between motivation or quality and worker satisfaction, that case needs to be made here. The authors should understand the difference between “satisfiers” and “motivators”. These are very different constructs with different predictors.

2. The (quite substantial) literature on the link between satisfaction and retention is missing from the background.

Methods

3. I don’t quite understand the index development. Was the index always 17 items, or was it reduced to 17 items based on findings (e.g., loading on main factors)? I ask this because it is referred to in one place as “the final satisfaction index” and results of some questions NOT included in the 17 items but appearing to be satisfaction questions, are included in results. (such as “most people in your job are very satisfied” and “they would like to continue working for their current health facility for quite some time”. Perhaps these questions came from someplace else, but it’s not clear.

4. Authors say where data were missing for a month, they substituted the average of contiguous months. That’s fine, but please report how frequently this happened.
5. Authors calculated a score for the two satisfaction subscales. But they don’t describe how.

6. Authors should report Cronbach’s alphas on their scales so readers know the extent to which the items are internally consistent.

Results

7. In third paragraph, of the five numbers mentioned in the text, only one is the same as the number in table 2.

Discussion

8. The discussion lacks depth in general and a deeper connection to the HRH literature. There doesn’t seem to be a strong understanding of the satisfaction literature. For example, the finding that general satisfaction is quite high is very common (and I wouldn’t say indicates positive response bias). This should be noted with references. Also, the distinction between satisfaction and motivation is lacking.

9. Authors state “in-service training was closely associated with general job satisfaction.” Where is this reported in results section? I must have missed it.

10. Third paragraph: I don’t understand the point. Are authors saying that pay for performance won’t work unless something is first done about the infrastructure? If so, this should be stated explicitly. (also, pay for performance schemes are expected to influence productivity and performance, but they may not influence satisfaction. This distinction is missing.)

11. Fifth paragraph: Reasoning related to why clinical officers might be less satisfied is not clear to me. Also, neither reason is relevant to the infrastructure scale (as far as I can understand).

12. Seventh paragraph: I don’t understand the point made about signal functions.

13. Limitations: please discuss the data quality issues related to using routine facility service statistics.

14. I understand choosing the primary care clinics with the highest volume of deliveries, but this should be mentioned in the discussion as a limitation to generalizability of findings to all dispensary-level facilities.

- Minor Essential Revisions

The author can be trusted to make these. For example, missing labels on figures, the wrong use of a term, spelling mistakes.

1. Do we know if there are any differences between those (70) who were interviewed and those (30) who were not? If so please report. If not, this should be in limitations section.

2. Discussion, Sixth paragraph: Related to the bivariate relationship between time in facility and satisfaction with infrastructure: there may be confounding between age and time in facility (since there is also a relationship between age and satisfaction with infrastructure.) This should be explored analytically.
- Discretionary Revisions

These are recommendations for improvement which the author can choose to ignore. For example clarifications, data that would be useful but not essential.

1. Data analysis: creating a binary indicator with strongly agree vs. all others obligates the authors to be very careful about how they word their findings. Just because respondents do not strongly agree doesn’t mean they disagree. For the reader to understand the findings (and the claims made by the authors) it is important to also know the frequency of agreement. For example authors claim “in this study health workers were very dissatisfied with their level of pay.” I know that only 12% strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their pay, but I don’t know how many agreed. I’m just guessing it would bring the percentage up to around a third? If so, the authors could no longer say “in this study health workers were very dissatisfied with their level of pay.” I suggest changing Table so reader can see at least both % strongly agree and % agree.

2. The reader does not know the frequency and other basic statistics for items related to facility characteristics. This limits the reader’s ability to understand the context for the bivariate results. I suggest adding these.

3. What authors sometimes refer to as “interpersonal relationships” for short (short for Supportive Interpersonal Environment) seems like a very interesting set of items reminiscent of the demand-control-support constructs in occupational health literature (the idea that high demand jobs create stress, but this can be mitigated by high control of the environment and also social support). This is more interesting than just interpersonal relationships. I think a shortened label such as “supportive environment” or “supportive relationships” is more reflective of the factor than “interpersonal relationships”

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests