

Why Social Workers Stay: A Study of Social Workers' Burnout, Embeddedness and Turnover Intentions

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Researchers: Jaydene Tucker

Supervisor: Dr Brody Heritage

The Embeddedness Construct and Aims of Research

The retention of social workers continues to be an issue among organisations that employ them, where the experience of burnout contributes vastly to high turnover rates. Previous research has focused primarily on concepts of job satisfaction and alternative job opportunities in explaining social workers' decision to leave. These concepts assume that people stay if they are satisfied with their jobs and are committed to their organisations, and that they leave if they are not. Despite these assumptions, alternative research has suggested that there are forces that work to retain employees, even in circumstances where they are dissatisfied or can find work elsewhere.

In response to this finding, the embeddedness construct explores why employees that work under similar conditions do not seek employment elsewhere and continue on. It considers employees' 'stuckness' to their roles from three perspectives of their organisations, occupations and broader communities. A relationship between embeddedness and turnover intentions has been found in an array of other professions, suggesting that the construct may be relevant to retention strategies for the social work profession.

This study aimed to investigate the embeddedness construct amongst social workers in relation to their experience of burnout and intentions to leave their roles. This research was interested which type of embeddedness (organisational, occupational or community) was of greatest relevance to social workers and whether embeddedness could moderate the strong relationship between burnout and turnover intentions that has been established in previous research.

Method

This study collected online survey data from 526 Social Workers across Australia, which was reduced to a population of 467 participants following treatment of missing data. Due to the variability in the term 'social worker' as an occupation, this

population included only personnel that met social worker accreditation requirements under the Australian Association of Social Workers. Participants were primarily female (86%) with an average age of 43 years old. They worked predominantly in the public work sector (72%) and were employed primarily on a full-time basis (72%). Workers from mental health care (20%) and medical health care (18%) made up the most represented fields of practice.

To meet the aims of this study, all participants were required to complete questionnaires assessing their intentions to leave their organisation, job satisfaction, perceptions of alternative employment opportunities, burnout and embeddedness (with facets of organisational, occupational and community). The interaction between burnout, turnover intention and three types of embeddedness (organisational, occupational and community) were explored, whilst controlling for job satisfaction and perceived employability. Three moderation models were used to test organisational, occupational and community embeddedness as moderators in the burnout-turnover relationship.

Research Findings:

Regression analyses supported the link between burnout and turnover intention established in previous research. The variables of organisational and occupational embeddedness were found to have a negative direct effect on burnout and turnover intention, while no relationship with community embeddedness was reported. Results indicated that embeddedness did not account for changes in the relationship between burnout and turnover intentions.

These findings have implications for organisations wishing to reduce burnout and retain social workers, whereby strategies promoting organisational and occupational embeddedness are recommended. Organisations employing social workers are also advised to manage the excessive working demands that typically lead to the burnout of social workers as a means to reducing their intent to leave.

This research calls for future studies utilising more complex designs, which investigate alternative moderators and additional control variables. In addition, intervention studies should explore the outcomes of embeddedness strategies used among social workers and the implications for this on actual turnover behaviour.