

## DETERMINATIONS OF DIRECT-CARE STAFF TURNOVER IN GROUP HOMES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH MENTAL RETARDATION

Nancy J. Razza, Ph.D.

**Abstract:** A model of direct-care human service staff turnover was proposed and tested with 236 direct-care staff members in nine private, nonprofit New Jersey agencies. A path analysis of the data was conducted. Four variables were found to contribute to current job satisfaction: agreement of the job with personal goals and values, burnout, satisfaction with supervision, and employment history. In turn, current job satisfaction led to intention to quit, which led to actual turnover. Implications for the human service field and future research were explored.

Employee turnover in human service organizations is a chronic and extensive problem, adversely affecting provision of care as well as taxing highly constrained budgets (Baumeister & Zaharia, 1987; Crimando, Riggall, & Hansen, 1986; Lakin, Bruininks, Hill, & Hauber, 1982; Zaharia & Baumeister, 1978a, 1978b, 1979). Although few researchers have empirically tested the relation between direct service turnover and resident welfare, a relation may be presumed on the basis of economic grounds (Baumeister & Zaharia, 1987). Citing the findings of Scheerenberge (1982), Baumeister and Zaharia reported that a full 80% of the cost of residential service programs is in the form of salaries.

Jacobson and Ackerman (1989) studied the turnover of direct-care staff members in the 38 of the 500 residential facilities in New York State. They found that the average annual turnover rate was 31%, with a mean staff tenure of 2.8 years. Forty-three percent of the employees had a tenure of less than one year. Community group homes experienced substantially higher turnover rates than did publicly run facilities. A comprehensive analysis by Braddock and Mitchell (1992) determined national turnover rates among privately operated community facilities to be 70.7%, a rate almost three times higher than that of direct-care workers in public institutions.

The concept of burnout has been addressed as a likely determinant of turnover among human service employees. Results of Jayarathne and Chess (1983) and Golembiewski, Hilles, and Daly (1987) supported the idea that a relation between burnout and turnover exists but the nature of the research does not establish the former as a cause of the latter. The industrial psychology literature suggests that turnover is a highly complex phenomenon and is most likely the result of multiple determinants (Mobley, 1982; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Price, 1977). A model of employee turnover developed by Mobley et al. is the most sophisticated attempt to date to explain turnover. These authors incorporated previously determined correlates of turnover and built on earlier models in an effort to capture the complexity of the turnover process for employees in positions of all types. Briefly stated, this model attributes turnover to employee perceptions, which are influenced by three broad categories of factors: organizational, economic/labor-market, and individual.

Because the Mobley et al. (1979) model provides the most comprehensive conceptualization of turnover, I chose it as the basis for designing a model of turnover for the employee group in the present study. Employees working in direct-care positions in community group homes for individuals with mental retardation were chosen in an effort to shed light on the relatively high rate of turnover among this subgroup of human service employees. I hypothesized that turnover direct-care staff members in group homes for individuals with mental retardation could be explained by an adaptation of the Mobley et al. model. I drew explanatory variables from Mobley et al.'s hypotheses. Further, I hypothesized that the addition of a measure of burnout would contribute to the explanatory value of the model. This decision was based on the previously cited research suggesting a relation between burnout and turnover. Finally, I did not include perceptions of labor market variables in the model because results of a partial test of the Mobley et al. model by Michaels and Spector (1982) revealed that perceived availability of alternative employment did not contribute to the explanation of turnover in their sample.

Specially, a model incorporating the following hypothesis was tested: (a) that individual variables and perceptions (agreement of job with personal values and goals, age, tenure, and burnout) contribute to current job satisfaction; (b) that job-related variables and perceptions (satisfaction with current job pay, satisfaction with supervision, distributive justice [i.e., the employees perception of the organizations overall fairness to employees]) and employment history similarly contribute to current job satisfaction; (c) that current job satisfaction leads to both intention to search and intention to quit; (d) that intention to search and intention to quit are additionally influenced by attraction-expected utility (i.e., the employees expectation of attractive alternative work roles within the agency); and (e) that intention to search and intention to quit leads to actual turnover within the next 6 months.

## STAGE 1: PILOT STUDY

### METHOD

A pilot study was conducted to determine whether additional variables not evaluated in previous turnover research might enhance the utility of the proposed model. In addition, because the study was designed to examine turnover in one highly specific employee population, I made an effort to ensure the inclusion of variables relevant to that employee group.

### SUBJECTS

Twenty direct-care residential employees randomly selected from a list of 66 employees in the same level position working for a private, nonprofit agency in central New Jersey were asked in writing to participate in the pilot study. All of them worked directly with adults who had mental retardation in the group homes in which these individuals resided. The group homes ranged in size from 6 to 12 residents.

### INSTRUMENTS

I designed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire with the help of the personnel director and the director of residential services of the involved agency. Each director had approximately 7 years of experience in direct-care of administrative positions in group homes for adults with mental retardation. The questionnaire was designed to highlight any particularly salient features that may be contributing to turnover in this group of employees, beyond what was known to influence turnover decisions from the literature reviewed previously.

Each set of variables was listed twice; once for the employee to rate his or her own potential reasons for leaving and once to rate perceptions of the reasons co-workers leave. Each set also contained space for the employee to note other reasons for leaving that were not included in the lists.

### PROCEDURE

A cover letter was attached to the questionnaire explaining the nature of the pilot study and requesting participation. Recipients were assured that their responses would not be viewed by any agency personnel. They were also instructed not to write their names or any identifying information on the forms. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included for them to return the forms directly to the author at a university address. This procedure was designed to encourage honest responding and ensure confidentiality.

Completed questionnaires yielded no new variables from the pilot study respondents. As a result, no new additions to the model were made.

## STAGE 2: TEST OF THE MODEL

## SUBJECTS

A list of 408 potential participants was compiled as a result of a presentation made to the New Jersey Association of Community Residential Providers. Representative of nine private, nonprofit organizations agreed to provide lists of their employees working in direct-care positions in their group homes that housed from 6 to 12 residents. None of the participating agencies utilized live-in staff for their group homes. Of the potential participants, 236 were reached by phone and responded to the questionnaire.

## INSTRUMENTS

The 54-item questionnaire used to assess subjects with respect to the 14 variables consisted of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) and measures of job satisfaction with supervision as compiled by Price and Mueller (1986) and revised by Price (personal communication, December 1988) for telephone interviews. The questionnaire also included a series of simple questions designed by the author to assess the variables for which no previously developed measures were found (i.e., agreement of the job with personal values and goals, future expectations regarding the job, satisfaction with current pay, intention to look for another job within 6 months, intention to quit within 6 months, and expectations of attractive alternative positions being available to the worker within the same agency). This inventory is a self-report form composed of three subscales: emotional exhaustion, de-personalization, and personal accomplishment.

Offermann (1985, cited in Keyser & Sweetland, 1985) reported high estimates of internal consistency for each of the three subscales along the dimensions of frequency and intensity. Estimates of internal consistency are reported separately for each of the three subscales. Cronbach alphas for the emotional exhaustion subscale are reported as .90 for frequency and .87 for intensity; for the de-personalization subscale, .79 for frequency and .73 for intensity; and for the personal accomplishment subscale, .71 for frequency and .73 for intensity. To assess the convergent validity of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Maslach and Jackson (1981) obtained independent ratings of individual employees by their co-workers or spouse and compared them to the employees self-report on the Maslach Burnout Inventory. In another study, Maslach and Jackson (1979) asked spouses to rate their police officer husbands and confirmed predictions that policemen who scored high on emotional exhaustion were seen as coming home angry, upset, tense, exhausted, and complaining about work problems (Maslach & Jackson, 1979). Maslach and Jackson (1986) provided information on the test-retest reliability of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Their data were obtained from a sample of 53 subjects who were either graduate students in social welfare or administrators in a health agency. The assessments were separated by a 2- to 4- week interval. The test-retest reliability coefficients were recorded as .82 for emotional exhaustion, .60 for de-personalization, and .80 for personal accomplishment.

Offerman (1985) noted that some intercorrelation has been found between high scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory and high levels of job dissatisfaction but that correlation coefficients were not so high as to suggest that the two constructs are synonymous (i.e., correlations ranged from .17 to -.23 in one study and from .06 to .02 in another). An additional difficulty in using the Maslach Burnout Inventory is that Maslach and Jackson (1986) reported that they have not yet determined a manner in which the scores of the three separate scales may be combined into a single meaningful score. As a result, a decision needed to be made regarding how to treat the inventory scores in the analysis. I decided to give the greatest weight to the emotional exhaustion score for the following reasons: (a) the relatively greater variability of scores on the emotional exhaustion subscale among the subjects sampled, (b) the previously cited correlation between emotional exhaustion scores and behavioral ratings, and (c) the greater test-retest reliability and internal consistency of the emotional exhaustion subscale. For these reasons, I calculated the results giving emotional exhaustion a weight of 10 and de-personalization and personal accomplishments each weights of 2.

## VARIABLES

The employees perception of the organizations fairness, or distributive justice, was measured by the Distributive Justice Index (Sorenson, 1985, cited in Price & Mueller, 1986), as revised by Price (personal communication, December 5, 1988) for ease of telephone administration. Distributive justice was defined by Price and Mueller as the degree to which rewards and punishments are related to performance inputs in the employees perception. The scale consists of six items in a Likert format. Reliability of the measure (Cronbach alpha) is reported to be .95. Validity was assessed by means of a factor analysis involving the examination of the six items on the measure and 16 job-related indicators, including salary, family responsibility, training, commitment, job satisfaction, routinizing, and upward and downward communication. Sorenson and Price and Mueller contended that the factor analysis lends considerable support to the convergency and discriminant validity of the Distributive Justice Index.

The employees satisfaction with the supervision of his or her job was assessed via the satisfaction with supervision scale devised by Price (personal communication, December 5, 1988) for use with telephone interviews. It consists of five items in a Likert-scale format. Validity and reliability information for this measure has not yet been determined.

I devised a scale to assess the agreement of the job with personal goals and values because I found no existing measure in the literature. This scale consisted of 3 items in a yes/no format. Employees were asked whether the kind of work they do fits with their personal values and whether the job will eventually help them to achieve a personal goal. In addition, employees were asked whether their schedule permits them to carry out desired activities in their non-work hours.

Age was determined by asking the employees year of birth and tenure, by requesting the month and year of hire. Employment history consisted of three questions assessing tenure at most recent position, number of prior jobs, and previous job tenures of less than one year. Intentions to search for a new job and intentions to quit the present job were assessed by one question each. Expectation of satisfaction with job one year from now and expectation of satisfaction with pay one year from now were each measured by a single direct question. The employees expectation of the likelihood of working at a different position in the same agency was assessed by a single question. A 5-item Likert-scale designed by Price (personal communication, December 5, 1988) was used to assess current job satisfaction. The scale takes into account the employees report of such issues as enjoyment, enthusiasm, and boredom on the job. Validity and reliability data were not available.

Turnover was assessed by collecting resignation dates of all those participants who left the agency voluntarily within the 6-month period following the assessment of the predictor variables. Voluntary turnover (quitting) was defined as turnover initiated by the employee (i.e., it did not include firings, lay-offs, within-agency promotions, or death).

## PROCEDURE

The questionnaire required a minimum of 15 minutes to administer. Sample size was limited by difficulties encountered in completing the calls in accordance with the studys time table and does not reflect participant cooperation. Six months after the completion of the interviews, directors of the involved agencies provided information on the employment status of the participants. Only participants who had fully separated from their employers were counted as having quit. Those who changed their job status within the agency (e.g., due to maternity leave, reduction in hours, or promotion) were not counted as having left, even though they may have left the specific job they held at the time of the assessment.

## RESULTS

Zero-order correlations were calculated for all of the variables assessed in the study and are

shown on Table 1. The data were then subjected to a path analysis. The analysis was a series of multiple regressions of each variable in the model, regressed on all preceding variables. The beta weights represent the standardized path coefficients and indicate the relative strength of the relations between all variables in the analysis. The path diagram in Figure 1 shows the beta weights for each path specified in the model.

With regard to the specific hypotheses, results showed that the measured variables contributed to turnover in the following manner: four variables produced significant beta weights along their respective paths to current job satisfaction: burnout,  $p < .001$ ; agreement of job with personal goals and values,  $p < .001$ ; satisfaction with supervision,  $p < .01$ ; and employment history,  $p < .05$ . In turn, current job satisfaction proved to have significant paths to both intention to search and intention to quit,  $ps < .001$ . Of these latter two variables, intention to quit had a significant path to the variable measuring actual turnover,  $p < .001$ . The variables assessing employees job expectations (i.e., expectation of satisfaction with pay one year from now and expectation of satisfaction with job one year from now) did not yield significant paths to attraction-expected utility provided to have nonsignificant paths to both of the variables it had been hypothesized to predict (i.e., intention to search and intention to quit). Overall, 61.2% of the variance of turnover could be explained by the tested model, with the fully recursive model accounting for 84.5% of the variance.

## DISCUSSION

Of the eight variables hypothesized to cause current job satisfaction, four had proved to have statistically significant paths. It is interesting that two of the variables that did not relate significantly to job satisfaction (satisfaction with current pay and distributive justice) were those that assessed the employees satisfaction with his or her rewards (i.e., pay, benefits, recognition). The paths from these two variables were calculated not only to current job satisfaction but to four other variables to which they may have related. In none of these cases were the paths significant. Moreover the nonsignificance of satisfaction with pay as a predictor was not simply the result of a majority of participants responding in the negative.

It is possible that the relative impact of satisfaction with pay was overshadowed by the impact of certain other factors. Rate of pay is a known quantity of which each employee is fully aware at the point of hire. Further, it is roughly equivalent for all employees at the direct-care level in privately run community group homes. Conversely, many of the other factors, such as the supervisors style and competence and the exact nature and pressures of the work are bound to be highly variable. An additional difficulty in evaluating the contributions of current pay satisfaction and distributive justice was discovered because a moderate intercorrelation,  $r = .406$ , was found, suggesting that their effects may have been attenuated.

It is likely that the proposed model could be improved by combining current pay satisfaction and distributive justice into one endogenous variable and by including a variable that assesses the employees perception of alternative opportunities in the job market, a factor that may be of particular importance during changing economic times.

Even with these limitations, it is still possible to view these results as having some important implications for the human service field: increased budgetary allowances for direct-care group home staff may not be the only means, or the best means, for improving staff retention. These findings suggest that tailoring the job to the individual as much as possible may enhance retention. One example of such tailoring would be the use of flexible scheduling. Similarly, the relation between employee and supervisor appears to be crucial to the employees job satisfaction. Based on the measures in this study, a supervisor who is perceived as easily approachable, shows concern for the employees feelings and opinions, and encourages the employees self-expression is likely to enhance retention. With regard to burnout, although there is no simple solution, direct service jobs could be designed so as to minimize the emotional exhaustion and overwork built into some positions. Further, supervisors could be trained to detect

the symptoms of burnout and provide greater support to employees.

For the final factor that contributed to job satisfaction -- employment history -- three points were measured. Employees who reported (a) longer tenure at their previous job(s), (b) no more than two jobs prior to the current one, and (c) no previous job in which they terminated their employment in less than one year were more likely to report satisfaction with their current jobs and, further, were less likely to have left by the time of the 6-month follow-up. It is possible that employers could screen out candidates with high turnover work histories in an effort to enhance staff retention.

These suggestions are proposed as hypotheses for future research. Such research would not necessitate great increases in human service budgets, yet would have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the lives of individuals with mental retardation who reside in community group homes.

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