

Journal of
Sociology, Social Work and Social Welfare
 Volume 3, Issue 1, 2009

Social Work Retention Research: Three Major Concerns

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Abstract

To understand a profession's viability in the market, each profession must understand recruitment, retention, and attrition of its members; i.e. the supply and demand of sufficient professionals to carry out the work of the profession. This study examines the conceptual ambiguity within social work research, specifically the use of the terms "retention," "intent to leave," "turnover," and in fact, "social worker." Further, this article examines the effect that occupational literature had on social work retention research. Social work studies find turnover as a daunting problem; however, the clear link between leaving social work jobs and leaving the profession was simply not compelling.

Introduction

Understanding retention in any profession was dependent upon the existence of thorough and ongoing workforce studies. However, workforce research, specifically retention of social workers, in the social work profession is problematic. There are three main concerns when studying the retention of social work labor force. First, workforce studies in social work were not only rare, but those completed relied upon inadequate databases. Social work studies thus far focus on professional organization membership, such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and more recently, licensed social workers. Second, there is conceptual ambiguity in within the profession in defining the term "social worker" and the term "retention." Finally, social work literature has built retention studies of our profession on the foundation of occupational behavioral research.

These three problems point to a rather startling revelation that bears on social work having a competing and important presence in the labor market. If social work cannot determine size, experience, and make-up of its membership, it cannot rationally plan for its academic and professional future. That is, how can the profession recruit and train individuals for careers in social work, without sufficient knowledge about its workforce? Further, without this knowledge it would not be possible for the profession to retain its workforce.

Workforce studies were basic to understanding how occupations and professions function in the market (Barth, 2001). The study of supply and demand (Becker, 1993) of sufficient professionals is necessary to understand a profession's viability in the market. Therefore, occupations and professions should study recruitment, retention, and attrition of members. These market elements were in a systemic relationship, each of which affects the others in varying degrees. Therefore, workforce studies regarding recruitment, retention, and attrition are individually, and collectively, important to a profession, and as such deserve rigorous analysis.

Social Work Workforce Studies

The National Association of Social Workers has carried out four workforce studies: three sampling the NASW membership and the most recent one, sampling licensed social workers. Three studies (Becker, cited in Gibelman & Schervish, 1993; Gibelman and Schervish, 1993, 1997) of the NASW membership focused primarily on demographics. In the first study, Becker (1961, cited in Gibelman and Schervish, 1993) examined the gender and racial composition of the NASW organization, as well as salaries of its members and their work settings. In addition, using the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) on social welfare personnel (the common nomenclature of social workers at the time), Becker surmised that nationally 21 percent of social welfare workers were members of NASW (1961, cited in Gibelman & Schervish, 1993).

In two studies, Gibelman and Schervish (1993, 1997) explored NASW membership, a limited representation of only one segment of the social work profession's workforce. Thus, the generalizability of the Gibelman and Schervish studies, based on sample alone, was limited as not all social workers were members of NASW. Their 1993 and 1997 studies looked at the same descriptive indicators, although both studies included distribution of NASW membership within nine geographic regions within the United States. None of these early studies asked questions about the profession that would address future issues, including the projected need for social workers or the regions more likely for social workers to be in demand. Certainly, there was no exploration about satisfaction with work and intentions to remain or leave the profession. In other words, none of the questions hinted at retention.

For several reasons, the first three early NASW studies did not yield a comprehensive picture of social work's workforce. First, NASW members represent only a small number of the profession's total workforce. The Census Bureau, Current Population Survey found as many as 840,000 citizens reported being social workers in 2002. The Bureau for Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Outlook Handbook Survey reported there were 562,000 social workers in 2004. Currently, NASW reports 151,000 members. However, all the numbers reported here were dependent on a definition of term "social worker."

Recently, the Center for Workforce Studies moved beyond demographics and broached the topic of retention of social workers (Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006). Whitaker, et al (2006) found retention was some cause for concern among licensed social workers. That is, nearly 19 percent of licensed social workers were no longer practicing within the profession (Whitaker, et al., 2006) and yet they maintain their licenses. In addition, 30 percent of licensed social workers did not plan to remain in their current position over the next two years; and of those, nearly five percent plan to leave the profession for other work (Whitaker, et al., 2006). These figures were certainly disturbing and point to two unanswered research questions posed in the conclusion of this study.

Barth (2001, 2003) attempted a workforce study to forecast how many geriatric social workers would be required in California once the large flux of baby boomers began to retire. The absence of a universal definition of the term "social worker" and the absence of a database that included non-universal definitions thwarted Barth's efforts. Further, no extensive data on leaving the profession existed until the most recent NASW study (Whitaker, et al., 2006). Yet, the question of retention, and why it might be a potential problem for social work, remains unanswered.

Defining the Term "Social Worker"

The problem of defining in the abstract who was a social worker has occupied social work scholars for decades. The National Association of Social Workers, Center for Workforce Studies, recently completed the fourth and most recent study (Whitaker, et al., 2006). However, Whitaker et al., (2006) found, as did Barth, that studying the profession's workforce was problematic as there were multiple definitions of the term "social worker" when what was needed was a single definition (Barth, 2003). Currently, Whitaker et al., (2006) found there were five definitions of the term "social worker" (p. 11). These definitions included individuals and employers using the title for those who may or may not have the required education or credential; several levels of state government licensure; and, individuals holding at least a bachelor's degree from a CSWE accredited institution (Whitaker, et al., 2006). Whitaker et al. (2006) did not include alternative definitions of social worker used in other nations; the five definitions predominate in practice in the United States. Thus, deciding what groups or individuals actually made up the ranks of social worker was hugely problematic and thus, identifying an accurate dataset was problematic. In sum, workforce studies in social work had no dataset from which to draw a representative sample.

Whitaker et al., (2006), unlike the three previous NASW studies, did attempt to address the dataset problem by studying a random sample of 10,000 licensed social workers throughout the United States. These data gathered from professional licensing boards regulated through State government in the United States. They chose this sample to reach social workers who might not have another identifiable professional affiliation, such as NASW membership. Whitaker et al. (2006) reported eight percent of licensed respondents did not hold a social work degree, possibly grandfathered into licensure. Whitaker et al. (2006) found that of licensed social workers entering the profession, 59 percent held MSW degrees, 31 percent held a Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) and two percent reported a Doctor of Social Work (DSW) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) as their first social work degree. Whitaker et al. (2006) perhaps chose this sample in order to offset the limitations of previous studies that focused exclusively on NASW members.

Whitaker et al. (2006) began to address the problem of supply and demand of social workers. For example, they found the social work labor force was older than other "health professions" (p. 8) and attrition was likely in the next two years and beyond. As the general population ages, demand for social workers will increase. While Whitaker et al. (2006) broached market concerns; they studied only social workers retained, that is, those who were currently working. Whitaker et al. (2006) did not study social workers not retained.

Defining the Term "Retention"

Although the issue of a dataset of social workers was methodologically problematic, there was another fundamental problem in workforce studies, a definitional problem. Just as the term, "social worker" was ambiguous, so was the term "retention." The social work literature used retention interchangeably with turnover, even though the two terms can have different meanings. The basic problem of clearly defining these terms points to other conceptual concerns within the social work literature in understanding why social workers leave the profession. It was first important to understand the occupational behavioral literature upon which social work based research regarding turnover and retention. Considered were three ideas within the occupational behavioral and social work literature: first the definition of turnover and retention; second, the operationalization of the phrase "intent to leave" as it related to turnover and retention; and third, the theoretical models used to explain turnover and retention. First examined were these three factors within the occupational behavioral literature and then in turn, within the social work literature.

Occupational Behavioral Literature

Occupational behavioral researchers most often conceptualize turnover as voluntarily leaving a job or as the end of the process of withdrawal from work (Prywes, 2000). In this sense, turnover was simply leaving a job. However not as easily defined, was the process that culminated in the individual's decision to leave a job. Withdrawal patterns may not have been the same for all employees; and, the time in which employees made these decisions varied.

The occupational behavioral literature sought to understand how an employee decided to quit a job and what variables affected an individual's decision to quit. The occupational behavioral literature researched conceptual models for decades. The classic model was derived from Mobley (1977; Mobley, Griffith, Hand, and Meglino, 1979). Mobley's conceptual model hypothesized that a worker first experienced job dissatisfaction, which prompted thoughts of leaving the job, which Mobley termed "intention to leave" the job. This intent preceded the workers' actual departure from employment or the culminating act of leaving the job. There was consensus in the occupational behavioral literature that "intent to leave" in fact precedes and was predictive of leaving a job. To understand that intent, the literature offered other conceptual models.

Munchinsky and Tuttle (1979) agreed that intent preceded leaving, but their models found that "biodata" or personal history variables, including age, tenure, and family responsibility preceded intent. Scott, Connaughton, Diaz-Saenz, Maguire, Ramerirez, Richardson, Shaw, and Morgan (1999) found that tenure was the best predictor of intent. Research regarding job searching raised the question: does one intend to leave before or after searching? Other models studied antecedents that predicted turnover included intention to search for a job (Sager, Griffith & Hom, 1998). Alternative models studied the quality of communication between workers and their supervisors and peers (Scott, et al., 1999) and organizational commitment (Blau & Lunz, 1998; Scott, et al., 1999). Additionally, others found that the process of leaving a job was not linear, but each antecedent might have individually affected intention to leave (Sager, et al., 1998). For example, intent to leave and job dissatisfaction each individually affected turnover.

A basis for the conceptual model debate within the occupational behavioral literature was a group of studies that reported that the statistical effect of models was small to medium. For example, Spector (1985) found job satisfaction for human service employees was related to actual turnover, but the correlation was medium ($r = .20$). Hellman's (1997) metaanalysis found job dissatisfaction related to intent, but a corrected mean found the overall effect between job dissatisfaction and intent to leave was small ($r = -.10$). McEvoy and Cascio (1987) metaanalysis found that turnover for a good performer was low, whereas turnover for bad performers was high. However, good performers were only slightly less likely to leave and their model explained only 11 percent of the variance in performers.

Nonetheless, the occupational literature trend toward metaanalysis seeks to refine the conceptual models and increase their statistical validity. Further, the occupational behavioral literature has a clear definition of turnover, and the combination of intent to leave and then leaving a job was logical and has support in the occupational behavioral research.

Social Work Retention Literature

Social work research has borrowed from the occupational behavioral literature. Social work studies on turnover used "intent to leave" as predictive of leaving a social work job, and offered models to understand the worker's intent to leave the job. However, conceptual ambiguity occurred as the social work literature attempted to generalize occupational concepts to a profession.

For example, unlike the occupational behavioral literature, the term turnover was problematic in social work. The social work literature did not convey a clear sense of the concept of turnover or retention, and in fact used the terms interchangeably. Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, and Lane (2005) completed a meta-analysis of child welfare literature. They began their meta-analysis with a review of 154 journal articles and unpublished manuscripts. Based on selection criteria that included child welfare populations, specified research methods and dependent variables of retention or turnover or both, Zlotnik et al., (2005) narrowed their analysis to a review of 25 studies.

The dependent variable in the majority of the studies (64 percent) was retention, while eight studies (32 percent) used turnover. A single study had both retention and turnover as the dependent variable. However, Zlotnik et al., (2005) reported that only seven of these studies operationally defined the dependent variable. Further, Zlotnik et al., (2005) found that each study had its own unique definition of the dependent variable of turnover and/or retention. In four of the studies, turnover was defined disparately as workers who left the agency (except those who left for reasons of "retirement or death, marriage/parenting, returning to school, spousal job move" (p. 33), simple job exit, and intent to leave. Zlotnik et al., (2005) found retention defined as "intention to remain employed in child welfare, remaining employed at a specific date, and remaining in the agency at the end of the Title IV-E training contract" (p. 33).

Social work literature followed the “intent precedes leaving” model first put forth in the occupational behavioral literature. In fact “intent to leave,” with only rare exceptions, was the dependent variable in social work research examining turnover or retention. Worth noting is that the social work literature also studied leaving a specific job or agency settings or specific categories of social workers such as NASW members’ intent to leave his or her current position. None studied turnover or retention as leaving the profession.

The conceptual models found in social work predominantly used burnout as the antecedent to job dissatisfaction; job dissatisfaction then preceded intent to leave, signaling a turnover problem (Koeske & Koeske, 1989, 1993; Siefert, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1991; Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1994). This model predominantly applied to child welfare workers, but also to NASW members (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984), hospital workers (Siefert, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1991) and workers in public agencies, non-profit agencies, and private practice (Jayaratne, Siefert, & Chess, 1988).

For example, Jayaratne and Chess (1984) began the social work discussion regarding antecedents of job satisfaction and burnout resulting in social workers intending to leave the job. This national study sampled 288 NASW members with MSW degrees. Their conceptual model cited occupational behavioral researchers such as Quinn and Staines (1978) who studied job satisfaction as it related to stress and strains of blue-collar workers. Jayaratne and Chess (1984) linked burnout, exemplifying such stress, to job dissatisfaction as “undoubtedly related” to intent to leave a job. However, this research encountered similar methodological problems as found in the occupational literature.

The Jayratne and Chess (1984) model found that stress variables, such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and workload, were not important predictors of burnout, job satisfaction, or intent to turnover. Further, over 80 percent of the NASW social workers were very to somewhat satisfied with their jobs; however, 43.1 percent were very to somewhat likely to find a new job. Multivariate regression found that their model explained 58 percent of the variance in job satisfaction, but only 23 percent of the variance in intent to turnover.

Siefert, Jayaratne, and Chess (1991), compared their 1979 and 1989 studies of NASW members who were health care social workers. The conceptual model for both studies included nine job characteristics: role ambiguity, role conflict, value conflict, workload, challenge, comfort, financial rewards, promotional opportunities, and job satisfaction. In 1979, only job satisfaction correlated significantly with likelihood of job turnover. In 1989, however, Siefert, Jayaratne, and Chess found significant and substantial correlations between the likelihood of job turnover and all of the outcome measures. That is, high levels of job satisfaction, personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion were all associated with a greater likelihood that the social worker would make a genuine attempt to find another job.

Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, and Chess’ (1994) model again researched job satisfaction and retention of workers extending the study to public agencies, non-profit agencies, and private practice. This rigorous study had four hypotheses about the associations between agency type, job satisfaction, and intent to leave. When compared to private agency social workers, public and nonprofit workers had lower job satisfaction, although all social workers scored high in job satisfaction, and were more likely to intend to leave, but only slightly more likely to leave.

Zlotnik et al’s (2005) metanalysis reported the specific results of the research they reviewed. However, they did not recalculate effect size. This was due to methodological concerns of the social work research, including varying research designs, lack of utilization of standardized measures, and the variety of analyses used.

One study reviewed by Zlotnik et al. (2005) that did not meet their inclusion criteria, provided evidence that intending to leave a job did not necessarily result in actually leaving a social work job, let alone the profession. Fryer and Miyoshi (1989) was one of many studies exploring workers’ intent to leave child welfare. The difference in this study was that the researchers returned one year later to investigate if those who intended to leave had in fact left their job. After one year, of those who had previously stated they intended to leave the agency, eight percent (15) had left the agency; seven percent (13) had transferred within agency; and, 1.1 percent (2) promoted. Fryer found no significant difference between child welfare workers who stayed and those who left in terms of dissatisfaction or burn out. However, those who left originally stated they never intended to stay in child welfare, were younger, and had less experience. Fryer did not explore if the fifteen workers who left child welfare actually left the profession.

Iglehart’s (1990) review of the social work literature on turnover found, as did this review, that social work literature follows occupational behavioral literature research. Iglehart stated that social work research found workers could be satisfied, believed they were good practitioners, intend to remain in that agency for only two years, and intend to look for other work. Iglehart speculated this meant the social work workforce was actually mobile, that is, workers may be changing jobs within the profession as a method of career advancement.

While social work studies may point to turnover as a daunting problem (Jayratne & Chess, 1983, 1984; Siefert, Jayaratne & Chess, 1991; Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1994; Zlotnik, et al., 2005) the clear link between leaving jobs and leaving the profession was simply not convincing. Beyond the conceptual and methodological

concerns, there was a more fundamental problem both in occupational behavioral and social work literature. That problem was these studies only address leaving a job; none speaks to leaving a profession.

Blau (2000) recognized this problem in the occupational behavioral literature as a conceptual one. For Blau, intent to leave a job was the relationship between the employee and his or her specific work. Specifically, work issues, such as job dissatisfaction, hours, shift, and work reduction, were important in predicting leaving a job. However, Blau acknowledged that job turnover did not necessarily mean the individual had left his or her profession. His conceptual model discussed commitment to a profession as it related to "professional withdrawal" or actually leaving a profession entirely.

Whitaker et al., (2006) did ask both questions, that is, intent to leave the job and intent to leave the profession. Nearly 30 percent of respondents intended to leave their current position in the next two years. The factors most frequently cited by social workers that would influence them to change their current position were higher salary (73 percent); lifestyle and family concerns (52 percent); more interesting work (37 percent); and, stress of the current job (35 percent). More importantly, 7.4 percent indicated they intended to retire or stop working, and another 4.7 percent indicated they intend to continue working, but leave the social work profession. The study was unclear whether those who intended to leave the profession had similar reasons as those who intended to change positions. However, of the 4.7 percent who intended to leave the profession, age was not significant, in that all age groups in similar proportion intended to leave the profession.

Ethnicity was significant in both intention to leave the job and profession. African Americans were significantly less likely than Whites were to remain in their current job (54 percent versus 72 percent). Further, African Americans were more likely to intend to leave the profession but continue to work (ten percent versus four percent). Gender was significant in leaving the profession, as men were more likely to plan to retire (eight percent of men versus five percent of women).

However, Whitaker et al. (2006) did not study whether those who intended to leave the profession actually left. Nonetheless, social work considered intentions to leave a position, and the profession, a problem. Yet, no in-depth studies exist about whether intending to leave one's agency or intention to leave the profession was in fact predictive of actually leaving the profession.

Herrick, Takagi, Coleman, & Morgan (1983) studied why social workers actually leave the profession. Herrick et al., (1983) surveyed both those currently employed as social workers and those who had already left the profession. Herrick et al. (1983) surveyed 180 University of Washington MSW alumni who graduated between 1960 and 1980, of 70 social workers who had actually left the profession. The generalizability of Herrick et al's (1983) study was problematic given the small sample and use of one university. Their findings may be an anomaly; then again, they might not. However, this was the only study whose author was specific and consistent in his definitions and concepts regarding retention.

Herrick et al. (1983) found that workers who left the profession fell into three broad categories: those critical of some aspect of the profession, those who left for personal life circumstances, and those who were attracted to other work. Their respondents' critique of the profession included, low salaries, uncertain funding, caretaking and family issues, conflicts with colleagues and supervisors, inadequacies in their education and the ineffectiveness of the profession. Herrick et al. (1983) did include in their study social workers who had left the profession. However, they did not include the question about intent to leave the profession.

Conclusion

Professional affiliations, such as membership in a national representative body, as well as holding an appropriate state license to practice, are both distinguishing characteristics of professionals. Professional licensure is the continuous official verification of education, post-educational training, and necessary experience while membership in a representative national body represents the collective voice of that profession. The profession must address questions regarding why so few social workers hold licenses and why even fewer are members of NASW.

Is it possible to say that the profession is unable to hold exclusive rights on the profession, including even the very definition of "social worker"? The profession itself appears to be in real jeopardy if it cannot lay claim to the term "social worker"; let alone maintain standards essential to classify social workers. Consider the jeopardy in which the public would find itself if only slightly more than half of physicians or attorneys held professional licenses or if a bit more than a quarter were members of AMA or the ABA. This finding speaks to longstanding and deeply disturbing aspects of the profession of social work that the profession's leadership must promptly address.

Thus, the only dataset practical for finding those who had left the profession is through surveying graduates of educational programs, the one affiliation often made over a lifetime. Knowledge gained from this dataset should provide insight into the characteristics and conditions within the profession that might impede workforce retention. Indeed, Master of Social Work graduates is the only dataset that could look fully at retention in contrast to previous studies examining those with the terminal professional degree in social work-the Master of Social Work degree.

Further, to understand the social work labor force and retention of the profession's members, two research questions are required. First, why do social workers intend to leave the profession? Second, why do social workers actually leave the profession? The rationale for these two research questions is important. First, the occupational literature supports the prediction that those who intend to leave the profession leave, and that characteristics of those who leave and those who intend to leave were similar. Therefore supported by occupational literature, the second question posed is "Why do social workers intend to leave the profession?" Second, studying those who have left the profession does tell us something about how social work can develop market control; or as Barth (2001, 2003) called for, producing the appropriate number of professionals to meet market demand.

In the face of market forces that were arguably hurting social work, a study of social workers not employed within the profession and their possible disaffection with the profession seems long overdue. Essentially, the profession should study how disaffection influences retention, and how we can improve the quality of the workforce. Both research questions, explored together, may tell us something about a social workers who "intent to leave" in comparison to those who have actually left the profession.

Labor force studies in social work, as in all professions, are important and necessary. It is crucial to understand the characteristics of the labor force and then to use this basic data to build and maintain a strong professional membership. Understanding the membership is fundamental to controlling the market and strengthening the profession. It is by controlling the number and quality of social workers that the profession itself is preserved.

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