Why Are They Leaving? Factors Affecting Intention to Leave among Social Workers in Child Welfare

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Summary

This article addresses a topic that has not previously been researched in Sweden, i.e. factors associated with the intention of social workers to leave their place of work. A comprehensive questionnaire was distributed to 309 social workers in child welfare in the County of Stockholm (drop-out rate: 3 per cent). The study comprised a total of forty-two workgroups. All the social workers handling referrals and investigating the situation of children and youth in these areas were included. One of the most striking results was that although 54 per cent of the social workers had been at their current workplace for two years or less, 48 per cent intended to leave their jobs. A logistic regression analysis showed that the variable of greatest importance for the intention to leave the workplace was lack of human resource orientation within the organization, i.e. the extent to which personnel are rewarded for a job well done, feel well taken care of and where management is interested in their health and well-being. A final conclusion of this study is that when measuring the impact of different aspects of work tasks compared with some aspects of organizational culture, it becomes clear that the latter seem to be most important in this respect.

Keywords: social workers, child welfare, working conditions, intention to leave

Introduction

In Sweden, as in many other countries, high staff turnover among social workers in the social services and difficulties in recruiting new personnel have been reported during recent years. These are a recurrent theme in the

annual supervisory reports of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare and the County Boards (2001–04). Within social services, these problems are described as most evident in the area of child welfare and there is concern for the long-term effect they may have on the quality of services.

Even though the situation in Sweden does not seem to be as serious as in, for example, the USA (Drake and Yadama, 1996; Gibelman and Schervish, 1996; Kammerman and Kahn, 1989; Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001; Powell and York, 1992) and Great Britain (Audit Commission 2002; Employers Organisation 2004; Winchester, 2001), it seemed important to further investigate the working conditions of social workers so as to increase the opportunities for managers to act at an early stage to prevent staff turnover. The aim of this study was to investigate which factors related to task issues and/or to the organization were of most importance for the intention to leave among social workers in child welfare.

Turnover and workload among Swedish social workers

Because of the lack of statistics on a national level on personnel turnover in the municipalities, it is difficult to obtain a detailed picture of the current situation concerning turnover and recruitment, or to gain an overview of developments in recent years. Swedish studies of turnover among social workers have been conducted primarily on the county level and with a qualitative design (see, e.g. Olsson, 2003; Wilson, 2004). Although it is difficult to generalize from these studies, their findings indicate a high turnover rate and recruitment difficulties in the counties studied. The problems are described as being most apparent in those sectors in which the social services exercise legal authority, such as child welfare[1] (Olsson, 2003). Although there is lack of data on a national level concerning retention and turnover among public human service workers, some studies confirm the picture of high turnover among social workers. In a study of family group conferences in child welfare in ten Swedish municipalities, 42 per cent of the 142 social workers in the study left their jobs during a two-year period (Sundell and Häggman, 1999) and in a study among twelve human service professions, social workers emerged as the professionals who where most interested in changing to a new place of work; 41 per cent (of 521 social workers) had given an affirmative answer to that question (Jönsson *et al.*, 2003). Others have pointed out that working in public social services, and especially in child welfare, seems more and more to be a low-status entrance and early exit area of social work practice (Dellgran and Höjer, 2005).

In addition to national reports of high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties in Sweden, some studies indicate that the pressure on social services' child welfare sections may have increased in recent years. Lundström and Vinnerljung (2001), in a comparison between the first three and the last three years of the 1990s, found that the number of youth in out of home care had risen by 40 per cent during the decade. The authors suggested that a probable reason for the increase was that nowadays, the courts are more likely to commit juvenile

offenders to the care of the social services. Despite deficiencies in the quality of local authority record keeping, there are indications that the number of referrals concerning children and youth has increased during the 1990s (National Board of Health and Welfare, 1998, 1999), also indicating that the workload of social workers in child welfare may have increased. Downsizing in other parts of the welfare system, especially with regard to school personnel working with pupil welfare, has probably also put additional strain on social services (see Lundström, 2000; SOU, 1998, p. 31).

Although, in several national reports on the work environment, social workers emerge as an especially vulnerable group, there has been little national research focused on their situation in Sweden. The available data come primarily from the regular national work environment surveys. An overview of the annual labour force investigations for the years 2001–04 shows that the professional category social worker/psychologist had the highest proportion of personnel with stress-related disorders; more than a quarter of whom (28 per cent) reported problems of this kind (National Work Environment Authority and Statistics Sweden, 2004). A comparison between the years 1997 and 2003 shows that the proportion of social workers with stress-related disorders had more than doubled, from 14 per cent in 1997 to 31 per cent in 2003 (National Work Environment Authority and Statistics Sweden, 2003). In an earlier report (National Work Environment Authority and Statistics Sweden, 2001), 91 per cent of the professional category social worker/psychologist described their work as mentally and emotionally stressful, which was the highest proportion of personnel in any professional category to give that answer.

To conclude, at the same time as high staff turnover, recruitment difficulties and indications of increased workload among social workers are reported across the country, several national surveys highlight this occupational group as one of the most exposed, as evidenced by stress-related disorders as well as with regard to their own descriptions of their working conditions. Despite this, there is little national debate and surprisingly few studies that focus on the working conditions of this group of personnel. No previous Swedish study has tried to capture what factors seem to have a high influence on or are decisive for staff turnover. The present study can, therefore, be seen as a first attempt to shed some light on this problematic situation. Are social workers in child welfare intending to leave their jobs because their caseloads are too high and their work too demanding? Or are there things about the way social service organizations are managed that are driving social workers out of child welfare?

Predictors of job satisfaction, intention to leave and turnover in human service organizations

The causes of staff turnover and recruitment problems are complex and not easily captured. They also differ between persons, occupations and workplaces. Nevertheless, previous research has consistently identified some predictors of

job satisfaction, intention to leave and staff turnover in human service organizations; and although the situation in Sweden does not seem to be as serious as in the USA or in Great Britain, there is no reason to believe that the process behind turnover should differ among these countries. After a short description of the turnover process as defined in this study, is a brief presentation of recurrent themes identified in previous research.

Turnover can be described as a process in which *job dissatisfaction* is the first step, followed by *intention to leave*, which finally, in some cases, can result in actual *turnover* (Mobley *et al.*, 1978; Bannister and Griffith, 1986). This process is, of course, of varying duration in time and does not necessarily have to follow a straight line. A person may move back and forth between *job dissatisfaction* and *intention to leave* or remain in this 'borderland' for longer periods. Even though the process does not always reach its final stage resulting in actual turnover, it is important to capture the factors related to work tasks or to the organization that seem to be associated with this process. The establishment of predictors more antecedent in the process would give managers the opportunity to intervene before it is too late. Even if a social worker does not actually leave the workplace, we might also ask about the consequences of this attitude for clients in terms of how work tasks are carried out, and of how long-term planning and work commitment is influenced by job dissatisfaction and/or intention to leave. The main focus of the present study was, therefore, not upon the question of a person leaving his or her place of work or how close the connection was between job dissatisfaction and turnover, but rather on what factors appeared to be of greatest importance for activating this process.

Previous research has identified a variety of factors associated with job (dis)satisfaction, intention to leave and turnover in human service organizations. Studies of working conditions in human service organizations in Sweden and elsewhere have emphasized the importance of specific aspects of the organizational context. Recurrent themes in these studies are supervision, support and feedback. In more recent years, the importance of organizational culture and climate has also been stressed.

A meta-analysis of antecedents to retention and turnover among social workers and other human service employees (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001) concluded that employees who lack organizational and professional commitment, who are unhappy with their jobs and who experience excessive stress and even burnout but not enough social support are likely to contemplate leaving the organization. The difference between those who intended to leave and those who actually had left their jobs was that the latter group, besides having alternative employment options, were unhappy with management practices.

Oxenstierna (1997) studied the importance of both the client families' situation and organizational conditions for the social workers' experience of job stress in the field of child welfare in Sweden. He concluded that the feeling of job strain was more pronounced when the question was framed without reference to the work with individual families, and stressed the importance of studying organizational conditions to further clarify the coupling between these and

job strains in work with clients. In another Swedish study, Söderfeldt and Söderfeldt (1997) emphasized the importance of organizational factors such as support from superiors and co-workers, leadership style and psychosocial climate for the experience of job stress.

Other studies of human service organizations have emphasized the importance of *supervision* for the experience of job satisfaction (Rycraft, 1990, 1994) and for the decision to remain within the organization (Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992). A poor relationship with one's immediate superior has been found to be decisive for the decision to leave (Samantrai, 1992). An interview study of child welfare workers found that new graduates who decided to leave their jobs shortly after employment were often dissatisfied with the extent and quality of the supervision (Rycraft, 1990). A British study found that the way supervision was carried out was the only aspect related to the organization that seemed to promote lower levels of stress for the social worker personnel. Particularly important was a supervisory style that reinforced the social workers' sense of being of value to the organization (Collings and Murray, 1996).

Social support is described as a significant moderating factor in the experience of stress (see, e.g. Aronsson, 1990; Johnson, 1989; Koeske and Koeske, 1989), and an important factor for retaining personnel (Alexander *et al.*, 1998; Jinnet and Alexander, 1999; Nissly *et al.*, 2005; Schafer and Moos, 1996). The significance of *feedback* from supervisor and/or colleagues has been emphasized in earlier studies of working conditions in human service organizations (see, e.g. Lee and Ashforth, 1996; O'Driscoll and Cooper, 1996). A study among Swedish human service organizations (Pousette *et al.*, 2001) has further demonstrated the importance of feedback for job satisfaction and commitment to the organization.

Other studies have pointed out the effect of the *climate of the organization*— i.e. behavioural and attitudinal characteristics of people that are accessible to external observers (Moran and Wolkwein, 1992) on job satisfaction, perception of stress and retention of personnel. Organizational climate can be observed in such contexts as the social climate of a workplace, its human resource orientation, and communication flow and diversity. Several studies in human service organizations have emphasized the importance of organizational climate for job satisfaction (Bradley and Sutherland, 1995; Ostroff, 1993; Silver *et al.*, 1997). A study of long-term mental health staff indicated that the affective context of the group may be more important in terms of staff retention than the way tasks are organized (Jinnet and Alexander, 1999). Work climate with more co-worker cohesion was described as having a key influence on staff retention in a study of long-term care staff (Schaefer and Moos, 1996).

In a study of occupational stress among British social workers, the importance of *organizational culture* was emphasized (Thompson *et al.*, 1996). Organizational culture can be defined as the pattern of basic assumptions that are invented, discovered or developed by a given group (Schein, 1990) (for a more extensive discussion of the concepts of organizational climate and organizational culture, see, e.g. Glisson and James 2002). Thompson *et al.* (1996) suggest that in some organizations, a 'culture of stress' exists that both reflects and

engenders a high level of stress. The importance of the organization is further stressed in a study of four work groups in the social services (Balloch *et al.*, 1998), in which social work staff more often than other professional groups were dissatisfied with organizational factors such as the way the department was managed, the extent to which attention was paid to suggestions from the personnel and the relationship between management and staff. Furthermore, when compared with two other categories of social workers, those working in child welfare experienced significantly higher levels of stress than the other groups of social workers (Bennet *et al.*, 1993).

The significance of *role conflicts* and *role ambiguity* (Cook *et al.*, 1990; Kahn *et al.*, 1964; Rizzo *et al.*, 1970) is a recurrent theme. Role conflicts occur when expectations are in conflict. These conflicting messages can come from one person, from two or more persons or can be inter-role (when one person has two or more conflicting roles). Role ambiguity (when there is uncertainty about the scope of the job and the expectations of others) is the one most often mentioned in earlier studies as negatively influencing perception of working conditions and has emerged as an important source of job dissatisfaction (Balloch *et al.*, 1998; Glisson and Durick, 1988; Harrison, 1980). A further finding in Harrison's study was the supervisor's importance for reducing role ambiguity. Other studies underline the significance of role conflicts as a predictor of stress and job dissatisfaction (Carpenter *et al.*, 2003).

Although in several studies, the workload in social services is described as high (Gibson *et al.*, 1989; Jones *et al.*, 1991; Samantrai, 1992; Söderfeldt and Söderfeldt, 1997), caseload size seldom appears to be of vital importance for the decision to leave the workplace, but rather to be a minor issue (Banaszak-Holl and Hines, 1996).

To conclude, previous research has identified a variety of factors associated with job (dis)satisfaction, intention to leave and turnover in human service organizations. An overview makes it obvious, however, that interpersonal relations within the organization seem to be of greater importance in this respect than more concrete things such as high caseloads and demanding tasks. Perceived lack of support, insufficient relationship with one's immediate supervisor and an insufficiently supportive or cohesive climate in the organization are more often mentioned as decisive for job dissatisfaction and/or intention to leave than are overwhelming job demands and a difficult work situation.

Method

A survey was conducted among 309 social workers in child welfare in half of the municipalities and half of the town districts in the County of Stockholm during the winter and spring of 2002/03. All the social workers in the field of child welfare who were handling referrals and investigating the situation of children and youth in these areas were included. The study comprised a total of forty-two workgroups in twelve municipalities and nine town districts.

Sample

The guiding principle in the selection of municipalities and town districts was to obtain a wide variety of areas in terms of socio-economic conditions. As the proportion (in relation to demographic data in the area) of new placements of children and juveniles in out-of-home care has been shown to co-vary with other structural conditions—areas with the highest proportion of new placements of children and juveniles also had high costs for social assistance per inhabitant, a high proportion of single mothers and a high proportion of non-European immigrants (Lundström and Vinnerljung, 2001)—the sample was drawn with this correlation in mind.

Statistical data collected by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities showed that about 40 per cent of the social workers in the social services in Sweden 2001 were employed in metropolitan areas and that 24 per cent of the total group of social workers in the country worked in the County of Stockholm (the data were compiled by Statistics Sweden expressly for this study). Although the sampled municipalities in the County of Stockholm vary widely in terms of socio-economic conditions, rural areas were not represented and the results cannot be generalized to the country as a whole.

Data collection

The questionnaire was distributed by personal visits to the workplace during an 'ordinary' staff meeting. This procedure made it possible to inform the respondents further about the purpose of the study, assure them of their anonymity and answer any questions that they might have concerning the study or the questionnaire. It also gave some measure of control over the situation when the questionnaire was filled in; the respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire in seclusion and without consulting their colleagues. Questionnaires with addressed envelopes were provided for the few social workers who did not participate in the meeting. The drop-out rate was 3 per cent (eleven out of 321 questionnaires were not returned).

The instrument: QPS Nordic

The questionnaire was based on the general Nordic Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work (QPS Nordic), developed by researchers from four Nordic countries (Dallner *et al.*, 2000). The QPS Nordic measuring instrument is based on three basic concepts—workload, complexity of tasks, and quality of the management—and consists of twenty-six scales and thirty-six individual items. Dallner *et al.* (2000) describe the conceptual validity as good; the factors corresponded well with most of the dimensions that were intended to be measured by the questionnaire. Reliability, as measured by Cronbach's

alpha, was also judged by the researchers to be acceptable, as was, in most cases, test–retest reliability. For a more detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts addressed by the QPS Nordic, the preparation of the questionnaire and the validity process, see Dallner *et al.* (2000). The QPS questionnaire was chosen as the measuring instrument because it included all of the factors identified in previous research as important for working conditions in human service organizations.

Analysis

The data were subjected to bivariate and multivariate analyses (SPSS 13.0). Logistic regression analysis is widely used in social research and can be used when the output variable is dichotomous. Results of logistic regression analysis provide valuable information about which factors are or are not of significant importance, in this case, for intention to leave and about how strong each factor is when other background variables are controlled for.

In a first stage, *bivariate analysis* was used for each of the original, nearly thirty independent variables and the dependent variable. Mean values were then compared for those who intended to seek a new job and those who did not; lastly, multivariate logistic regression analyses were conducted. Binary logistic regression was used for multiple analyses.

The dependent variable

The question 'How likely is it that within a year you will be actively looking for a new job?' was assumed to be an adequate way of operationalizing *intention to leave* and represented the dependent variable in the analyses. The four response alternatives were 'not at all likely', 'not very likely', 'fairly likely' and 'very likely'. The dependent variable was dichotomized by combining the four alternatives into two.

Although it is not possible to equate intention to leave with actual turnover, intention to leave has been described as the single strongest predictor of turnover (Alexander *et al.*, 1998; Hendrix *et al.*, 1999) and therefore is described as legitimate to use as an outcome variable in turnover studies (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001). In some studies of staff turnover, the advantages of focusing on intention to leave instead of measuring actual turnover, which would entail locating and interviewing those who have already left the workplace, are described. Focusing on actual turnover not only entails difficulties in tracking down those who have already left the organization, but also means that the study will be retrospective with the risk of hindsight biases and less reliable results (see the discussion in Goldberg Levin 2003).

Independent variables

In accordance with the aim of the study, a sample was drawn of the variables at task level and at organizational level to be included in the analysis. The variables that were included were chosen with respect to their importance as identified in previous research. The bivariate correlations between all these variables were examined and several variables were excluded because they were strongly correlated to other independent variables.

   The internal homogeneity of the scales was examined by computing Cronbach's α-coefficients. For two of the scales, the alpha values were below the lower limit of acceptance and, in these cases, single items were used instead of the whole scale. The excluded scales had low alpha values when the instrument was tested in the validation process (see Dallner *et al*. 2000). In addition to the background variables of age, sex and professional experience, the final regression model included nine scales and five single items. The reason to include the single items was that two of them measured different kinds of job demands as *incidence of emergency cases* and challenging situations as *presence of threats and violence*. These were essential to include so as to have many aspects of demands included in the analysis. Concerning the other three single items, *control of decisions* is described in some models as being of importance (Karasek, 1979; Karasek and Theorell, 1990; Siegrist, 1996) and the two items measuring *inequality* constituted together one of the dimensions of organizational climate that is included in the QPS Nordic, which, in earlier research, emerged as important for the intention to leave.

   Table 1 presents the scales, the items of which they are composed and the single questions used in the analysis. The alpha values of the scales are presented. For a more detailed description of the scales in the questionnaire, see Dallner *et al.* (2000).

Results

Profile of survey respondents

Many of the social workers who completed the survey had only recently been recruited and were relatively inexperienced at their jobs (see Table 2). Of the 309 respondents, 29 per cent had been working in the social services for two years or less and almost half of them (48 per cent) for five years or less. Fifty-four per cent had been at their current workplace for two years or less. Only about 25 per cent had been working for more than five years at their current workplace. The majority were women (86 per cent). As many as 95 per cent held at least a BSW degree and 15 per cent of the total group an additional academic degree. Six persons (2 per cent) held a MSW. Concerning the kinds of cases they handled, 38 per cent of the respondents replied that they worked primarily with children, 35 per cent with adolescents and 27 per cent with both children and adolescents (see Table 2).

Table 1 Scales and single questions

	Items[1]	Cronbach's alpha
Scales		
Quantitative demands	Have too much to do	0.82
	Have to work overtime	
	Workload tends to pile up	
Learning demands	Work tasks are too difficult	0.75
	Performing tasks for which more training is needed	
	Performing tasks for which more experience is needed	
Role clarity	Responsibilities are known	0.74
	Exactly known what is expected at work	
Role conflicts	Obliged to do things that should be done differently	0.70
	Given assignments without adequate resources to complete them	
	Confronted by incompatible requests from two or more people	
Positive challenges at work	Work is challenging in a constructive way	0.75
	Work is considered to be meaningful	
Support and feedback from superior	Support and help from immediate superior if needed	0.79
	Immediate superior is willing to listen to work related problems if needed	
	Work achievements are appreciated by the immediate superior	
Fair leadership	The immediate superior distributes the work fairly and impartially	0.80
	The immediate superior treats the workers fairly and equally	
	The relationship to the immediate superior is a source of stress	
Social climate	To what extent the climate in the work unit could be described as:	0.82
	– encouraging and supportive	
	– distrustful and suspicious	
	– relaxed and comfortable	
Human resource orientation	Rewarded for a work well done	0.78
	Workers are well taken care of in the organization	
	The management is interested in the health and well-being of the personnel	
Single questions		
Control of decisions	Having influence over important decisions at work	-
Incidence of emergency cases	Having to change the plans for the work day because of sudden crises in client work	-
Exposure to threats and violence	Exposed to threats and violence at work	-
Inequality concerning gender issues	Inequalities in the way men and women are treated at the workplace	-
Inequality concerning age	Inequalities in the way older and younger employees are treated at the workplace	-

[1] The response alternatives are graded 1–5, e.g. for all questions except *social climate*, *human resource orientation* and *inequality* (see below): 1 = very seldom or never, 2 = rather seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = rather often, 5 = very often or always. For the questions measuring *social climate*, *human resource orientation* and *inequality*, the response alternatives are: 1 = very little or not at all, 2 = rather little, 3 = somewhat, 4 = rather much, 5 = very much.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

	Number	Percentage
Age (*n* = 308)		
20–30	54	17
31–40	121	39
41–50	77	25
51–60	52	17
60+	4	1
Gender (*n* = 307)		
Women	263	86
Men	44	14
Educational level (*n* = 304)		
BSW	237	78
MSW	6	2
BSW and another university education	45	15
Other university education	14	5
No university education	2	1
Terms of employment (*n* = 308)		
Permanently employed	268	87
Temporarily employed	40	13
Length of employment at current workplace (*n* = 302)		
0–2 years	163	54
>2–5 years	64	21
>5–10 years	25	8
>10 years	50	16
Professional experience (*n* = 304)		
0–2 years	88	29
>2–5 years	56	18
>5–10 years	68	22
>10 years	92	30

With respect to how work tasks were defined, the most common reply was that besides processing referrals, their tasks also included giving support and advice to families and following up earlier cases (34 per cent); 21 per cent replied that they also provided family treatment in addition to their other tasks. Only 4 per cent (twelve persons) replied that their work was solely to process referrals and conduct investigations of the situation of children or/and adolescents.

Nearly half of the whole group of respondents (48 per cent: 144 of 302) replied that they *fairly likely* or *very likely* would actively seek a new job within a year. The distribution of replies among the four response alternatives was fairly even. Among those with permanent employment, the numbers were 43 per cent (113 of 262) and the distribution of replies among the four response alternatives were quite similar to the whole group of respondents. Only those with permanent employment (87 per cent of the respondents) are included in the following analyses.

The social workers who intended to leave and those who did not

Table 3 shows the difference between those who intended to leave and those who did not, in terms of the independent variables. As the table shows, there

Table 3 Comparisons between respondents who intend to leave their current workplace (*n* = 113) and those who do not (*n* = 149). Means and significance level (according to t-test)

	Total group (*n* = 262)	Not intending to leave (*n* = 149)	Intending to leave (*n* = 113)	Significance level
Background variables				
Age[1]	40.4	40.5	40.1	n.s.
Per cent women	85%	88%	81%	n.s.[2]
Years of professional experience	8.6	8.8	8.4	n.s.
Variables on task level				
Quantitative demands[3]	3.5	3.4	3.7	**
Learning demands	2.7	2.7	2.7	n.s.
Role clarity	3.9	4.0	3.8	*
Role conflicts	2.9	2.7	3.2	***
Positive challenges at work	4.0	4.1	3.8	**
Control of decisions	3.4	3.6	3.1	***
Exposure to threats and violence	1.6	1.5	1.9	***
Incidence of emergency cases	3.2	3.2	3.3	†
Variables on organizational level				
Support and feedback from Superior	3.7	4.0	3.4	***
Social climate	3.8	4.1	3.5	***
Inequality concerning gender issues	2.1	1.9	2.3	**
Inequality concerning age	2.0	1.9	2.3	***
Human resource orientation	2.6	2.9	2.2	***
Fair leadership	4.1	4.3	3.8	***

† $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
[1] The response alternatives were graded 20–30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60 and >60. Internal midpoints are used to calculate means.
[2] According to chi-square test.
[3] The response alternatives are graded 1–5, e.g. for this question, 1 = very seldom or never, 2 = rather seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = rather often, 5 = very often or always. In the table, a higher figure indicates a higher value, e.g. higher demands than for the comparison groups. In some cases, a higher value is positive and indicates good working conditions and, in other cases, it is negative and indicates poor working conditions, depending on what is being referred to in the question.

were significant differences between those who intended to leave and those who did not on all the variables on the organizational level and, with the exception of learning demands, for the rest of the variables on task level. None of the background variables had a significant relation to intention to leave. It was obvious that neither age nor gender had a significant relation to intention to leave, although men were slightly overrepresented among those intending to leave (19 per cent), while only 15 per cent of the group of respondents as a whole were male.

Those who intended to leave described *quantitative demands*, *role conflicts* and *exposure to threats and violence* as significantly higher than those who did not intend to leave, at the same time as they described *role clarity*, *positive challenges at work* and *control of decisions* as significantly lower than did the other group of respondents.

There was a general tendency for the variables on the organizational level to be more closely associated with intention to leave than those on the task level.

Regarding the variables on the organizational level, the differences were significant between those who intended to leave and those who did not, concerning all these variables. The former group described support and feedback from their immediate superior as considerably lower and the social climate within the organization as less encouraging and supportive, less relaxed and comfortable, and more distrustful and suspicious. They also more often felt that people of different ages and genders were treated differently. The largest differences in how the two groups responded were to be found in how they described the human resource orientation within the organization, where those who intended to leave more seldom felt rewarded for a job well done or well taken care of, and perceived the management as being less interested in their health and well-being than did the others. The greatest difference in mean scores was found in the extent to which respondents considered the organization to have a human resource orientation.

Multiple logistic regression analyses of factors related to intention to leave

The next step in the analyses was to examine the importance of the variables in multiple logistic regression analyses. To begin with, the relative importance of each independent variable was tested when controlled for gender and age only. In addition to gender and age, Model 1 comprises all variables on the task level, and Model 2 all variables on the organizational level. The composite Model 3 includes all the variables. The results of a logistic regression are presented in terms of odds ratios. An odds ratio close to 1.0 indicates that the variable is of minor importance for intention to leave. An odds ratio over 1.0 indicates a positive association (i.e. the higher a variable is scored, the stronger is the intention to leave) and below 1.0 a negative association to intention to leave (i.e. the higher a variable is scored, the lesser is intention to leave). The significance level shows the possibility that the association has occurred by chance; the higher the significance level, the lesser is the possibility of it having occurred by chance.

As can be seen in Table 4, of the variables in the complete model (Model 3), the variable that measured different aspects of organizational culture emerged as most important for intention to leave: *human resource orientation.* Among the other variables, none was significant at the 5 per cent level, although there was a tendency to association with *social climate*, *positive challenges at work* (i.e. if work is challenging in a constructive way, if work is considered to be meaningful, if skills and knowledge possessed are useful in work) and *exposure to threats and violence.*

When controlling for age and gender only, all the independent variables, except for learning demands, were significantly related to intention to leave. In many cases, the odds ratios were large. The strongest effects were from four of the variables at the organizational level: *human resource orientation*, *fair*

Table 4 Results from logistic regression analyses (*n* = 262). Odds ratio and significance levels for intention to leave

	Controlling for age and gender	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Background variables				
Age		0.90	0.89	0.88
Women (ref. category men)		0.53	0.65	0.59
Occupational experience		1.00	1.01	1.02
Variables on task level				
Quantitative demands	1.51**	1.09		0.99
Learning demands	1.00	0.75		0.89
Role clarity	0.59**	0.73		1.05
Role conflicts	2.65***	1.69*		1.39
Positive challenges at work	0.50**	0.70		0.63†
Control of decisions	0.47***	0.63*		0.76
Exposure to threats and violence	2.08***	1.68*		1.49†
Incidence of emergency cases	1.43*	0.97		1.20
Variables on organizational level				
Support and feedback from superior	0.37***		0.84	0.91
Social climate	0.38***		0.59*	0.65†
Inequality concerning gender issues	1.50**		1.21	1.23
Inequality concerning age	1.62***		1.23	1.10
Human resource orientation	0.34***		0.51**	0.52**
Fair leadership	0.35***		0.79	0.87
Nagelkerke pseudo R square		**0.24**	**0.31**	**0.38**

† *p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

leadership, support and feedback from superior and *social climate*, closely followed by *role conflicts*, which was the most powerful among those at the task level.

In Model 1, in which the variables at the task level were included, the association remained significant with three of these variables: *role conflicts*, *control of decisions* and *exposure to threats and violence*, even though the odds ratios decreased and the significance level fell in all cases. In the complete model (Model 3), when the variables on the organizational level were also included, the odds ratios were even lower for the three of them and *exposure to threats and violence* was, besides *positive challenges at work*, the only one that was still significantly related to intention to leave. It becomes clear that in many cases, other factors related to work tasks and especially some aspects of the organization seem to moderate their importance for intention to leave. This is most obvious for perception of *role conflicts* and *control of decisions*, in which the association with intention to leave disappears when different aspects of leadership and of the organizational climate are considered.

Concerning *quantitative demands*, the association with intention to leave was significant when controlling only for gender and age but the association did not remain, either when other variables on task level were included in the model, or in the complete model. The other variable that can be seen as closely related to quantitative demands, *incidence of emergency cases*, showed a weak association with intention to leave when controlling for age and gender only, but this

significant association disappeared in the more complex models. *Learning demands* showed no associations with intention to leave in any of the models.

To conclude, it seemed that none of the variables that measured different kinds of *demands*—quantitative demands, learning demands or high presence of emergency cases— seemed to be of significant importance for intention to leave.

Regarding the variables on the organizational level, it was clear that of the three salient associations in Model 2 (i.e. when only these variables, except for the background variables, were included), the association remained significant for only one of those variables measuring organizational culture—*human resource orientation*—although on a lower level, when also controlling for the variables on task level. The tendency remains for association with another of the variables measuring organizational culture, namely *social climate.* The perception that people of different ages and genders were treated differently did not seem to be significantly related to intention to leave. Worth noting is that *support and feedback from superior* in Models 2 and 3 had no significant relation to intention to leave. In the complete model (Model 3), the odds ratio for this variable got even closer to 1.00. The extent to which the *leadership was perceived as fair* had a considerably large negative odds ratio and was significantly related to intention to leave in Model 2, but not when also controlling for the variables on task level in the complete model. Overall, the explanatory value in terms of Nagelkerke pseudo R square was higher for the variables on the organizational level than for those at task level. Although none of the background variables showed a significant association with intention to leave, there was a tendency for women to be less likely to report an intention to leave their workplaces.

To conclude, these results indicated that it was not aspects of the work tasks that seemed to be of greatest importance for intention to leave, but rather some aspects of the organizational conditions. It was neither overwhelming demands nor role conflicts that seemed to be most important in this matter, but rather a perceived lack of *human resource orientation* within the organization, where people did not feel sufficiently rewarded for a job well done, valued or taken cared of. It was rather the perceived lacks than the feeling of overload that were driving the social workers away from their jobs.

Discussion

Of the more than 300 social workers in child welfare in the County of Stockholm who replied to the questionnaire in this study, 48 per cent answered that they are *fairly likely* or *very likely* to actively be looking for a new job within the year. Regardless of whether the social worker finally leaves the workplace or not, this attitude indicates dissatisfaction with the situation at the workplace and probably has a negative impact on work commitment and long-term planning of the work and therefore also on the clients involved. It appears, therefore,

as important to ascertain what factors, on the task level or the organizational level, are important for explaining this attitude.

The design of this study does not make it possible to identify causal relationships. In other words, it is not possible to conclude that the variables that were associated with the intention to leave in the analyses had a causal link to the intention to leave. The conclusions that can be drawn from these analyses are that certain associations have emerged and that some of the variables seem to be of greater importance in this respect than others. Behind these associations, there might be complicated interaction effects that this analysis did not fully capture.

The results of this study can be summarized in two more general observations. First, the *human resource orientation* of the organization, i.e. to what extent personnel are rewarded for a job well done, feel well taken care of and where management is interested in their health and well-being, was the variable of major importance. The importance of the human resource orientation of the organization is a finding that supports the study of Huxley *et al.* (2005), who found that commitment to work was higher among those social workers who had a positive view of the way the employer treated them, where feeling valued at work was one aspect. The importance of being valued by the organization has also emerged in a number of qualitative studies of social workers (Gibbs, 2001; Olsson, 2003; Rycraft, 1994) and it was a significant factor in the decision of public service workers to stay or leave (Audit Commission, 2002). When compared with highly educated hospital personnel ($n = 3,186$), compulsory school personnel ($n = 502$) and pre-school personnel ($n = 307$), the social workers in the present study valued the quality of their own work as significantly lower ($p < 0.001$) than did the comparison groups (Tham and Meagher, forthcoming). Perhaps the great importance the social workers attached to being rewarded and valued for a job well done can be partly explained by their low self-estimation of the quality of their work. In this perspective, external valuing of their work seems essential.

Second, several factors on task level, such as *quantitative demands*, *learning demands*, *role clarity* or *incidence of emergency cases*, did not seem to be associated with intention to leave, either when other variables on task level were controlled for, or in the complete model when the variables on the organizational level were included as well. The only one of the variables measuring aspects of demanding work situations that showed an association, although weak, with intention to leave was *exposure to threats and violence*. The other of the two variables on the task level that showed a tendency to associate with intention to leave, i.e. *positive challenges at work*, was also one of the variables that measured perceived lack of demands rather than overwhelming demands; the feeling that work was not sufficiently challenging or meaningful.

That *social climate* showed association, although weak, to intention to leave is a finding that is in line with those of Schaefer and Moos (1996), who described co-worker cohesion as a key influence on staff retention. That the affective context of the work group may influence quitting intention (Jinnet and Alexander, 1999) or job satisfaction and intention to stay (Schaefer and Moos, 1996) to a greater degree than quantitative work demands has emerged

in earlier studies. Worth noting also is that a longitudinal study showed that turnover intentions motivated by disaffection with the organization and its values were most likely to result in an actual loss of personnel (Vandenberg and Barnes Nelson, 1999). This finding is also in line with the results of a study of factors associated with nursing home staff turnover, in which intensity of work demands was found to have no effect on turnover (Banaszak Holl and Hines, 1996). The fact that the social workers in the present study, compared with other highly educated human service workers (Tham and Meagher, forthcoming), described quantitative demands as significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) makes this result more surprising. It is evident that although the social workers worked harder in the sense that they were more often obliged to work overtime and more frequently felt that they had too much to do, this was not decisive for their intention to leave. In other words, it seems that a stressful and demanding situation at the workplace can be managed if one feels rewarded, valued and taken care of by the management.

The two leadership dimensions measured in this study—*fair leadership* and *support and feedback from superior*—were not significantly related to intention to leave when controlling for all the other variables in the complete model. Although it is hard to compare studies with different designs and different definitions of the concepts measured, the results of this study do not support earlier studies in human service organizations, in which the quality of the supervision and the quality of the relationship to one's superior are important factors when it comes to job satisfaction and intention to leave (Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992).

The downside of using a questionnaire for data collection is that this method does not allow follow-up questions, which can add depth to the picture or further clarify what the respondent more specifically has in mind. To feel *rewarded for a job well done* can include getting a higher salary as well as verbal or other acknowledgements, such as travel or participation in cultural events. At the same time, to *feel well taken care of* by the employer can have different meanings for different respondents and can theoretically mean everything from having a pleasant and secure physical work environment to the feeling of being listened to and seen by the employer, being given a sufficient job introduction as a newly graduated social worker or that the employer tries to satisfy requests for further education or holidays. To *show interest in the health and well-being of the personnel* can be recognized in different ways, such as through keep-fit measures, a safe working environment, subsidized lunches or recreational trips.

The fact that many of the social workers in the present study were relatively inexperienced as social workers, as well as newly recruited, can be seen as contributing to the importance of feeling well taken care of and valued by the organization. The importance of giving newly recruited personnel a good introduction to the job and to the workplace has been emphasized in recent national studies in which social workers were interviewed regarding work conditions and stress (Olsson, 2003; Wilson, 2004).

To process referrals and investigate the situation of children and youth is an occupation in which the social worker is seldom welcomed by the client

families and the work he or she performs is even more rarely commended by them. Moreover, social workers, especially those working in the field of child welfare, are frequently under criticism and a target for negative publicity in the press, in which their actions or failures to act are subject to blame. Even though the situation in Sweden is not wholly comparable with that in Great Britain (see, e.g. Ayre, 2001; Harlow, 2004; Jones, 2001; Lymbery, 2001), the perception of how the media portrayal of social workers as '*sometimes too weak, sometimes too strong, but never to be trusted*' (Ayre, 2001, p. 890) seems applicable in Sweden as well. In this perspective, the need to feel rewarded, valued and well taken care of by the employer seems even more understandable and essential.

Conclusion

A final conclusion of this study is that when measuring the impact of different aspects of work tasks compared to some dimensions of leadership and organizational culture for the social workers' intention to leave the workplace, it becomes clear that the latter ones seem to be most important in this respect. Knowledge that organization-related factors seemed to be of greatest importance for the social workers' intention to leave gives employers an opportunity to counteract job dissatisfaction and, in the long run, staff turnover, by adopting sound staff policies under which people feel rewarded, valued and well taken care of. It should, after all, be easier to prevent staff from leaving for reasons of poor management than for reasons of demanding, difficult and complicated tasks.

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Note

1. The concept of child protection is not used in Sweden and access to public child welfare services is not gained primarily via a child abuse report. Besides handling referrals, the majority of social workers in these groups also work, to a greater or lesser extent, with family support services and applications from families. For a more detailed description of the Swedish child welfare system, see Olsson Hort (1997) and Wiklund (2006).

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