

Beyond job satisfaction: a job embeddedness-based mediation model to explain turnover intention in Chinese social workers

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Executive Summary

This study addresses the persistent challenge of high turnover intention among social workers in China, where approximately 28.8% of surveyed workers have considered quitting and 18% plan to leave the industry within three years. The authors argue that existing turnover models — specifically the Price-Mueller (PM) model and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model — rely excessively on endogenous attitudinal variables such as job satisfaction and burnout, and insufficiently account for structural network forces. To address this, the study integrates 'job embeddedness' as a dual mediating construct alongside job satisfaction, constructing a model tested via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using data from 671 Chinese social workers drawn from the China Social Work Longitudinal Study 2019 (CSWLS 2019). Key findings indicate that organizational working conditions — job stress, work support, and salary — significantly influence turnover intention both directly and indirectly. Job embeddedness demonstrated stronger mediating power than job satisfaction across most pathways, particularly for job stress and work support. Salary uniquely operated only through job satisfaction, not through job embeddedness. The authors conclude that retention strategies in the social work sector warrant prioritization of embeddedness-building mechanisms, given the relational and Guanxi-oriented nature of Chinese professional social work culture.

Key Insights

1. Job embeddedness demonstrated stronger explanatory power for turnover intention than job satisfaction, with effect size (f^2) evidence supporting its superior contribution to variance explained in the turnover construct.
2. The mediating pathway from salary to turnover intention operated exclusively through job satisfaction, not through job embeddedness, suggesting salary influences retention primarily via affective evaluation rather than structural network deepening.
3. A statistically significant serial mediation chain was confirmed for job stress and work support (working condition → job embeddedness → job satisfaction → turnover intention), indicating a sequential cognitive-then-affective mechanism for employee retention decisions.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations seeking to reduce social worker turnover may find that interventions targeting structural embeddedness dimensions — Links, Fit, and Sacrifice — produce stronger retention effects than interventions focused solely on job satisfaction or compensation adjustments.

- Demographic variables including age, marital status, educational level, and organizational tenure showed significant effects on turnover-related constructs, indicating that uniform HR retention policies may be less effective than differentiated approaches tailored to workforce subgroups.

Frameworks Mentioned

Price-Mueller Model — A turnover model categorizing determinants of turnover intention into external environmental, individual, and organizational environmental factors, with job satisfaction as a core mediator.

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model — A framework classifying job characteristics into demands (e.g., stress, emotional burden) and resources (e.g., support, job significance), used to explain burnout and turnover via resource depletion mechanisms.

Conservation of Resources Theory — A stress theory positing that individuals accumulate and protect resources, and that stress results from resource loss or threat; applied here to explain how work support buffers and job stress accelerates turnover intention.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study employs a rigorous PLS-SEM methodology appropriate for reflective-formative higher-order constructs, conducts thorough robustness checks (nonlinearity via Ramsey RESET, endogeneity via Gaussian copula, heterogeneity via FIMIX-PLS), and uses a large nationally sampled secondary dataset (n=671). The integration of cultural context (Guanxi) into the theoretical rationale is a notable contribution to indigenization of PMS research. **Limitations:** The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference despite the directional hypotheses. The dataset is from 2019 and restricted to five Chinese cities, constraining temporal and geographic generalizability. Community embeddedness is excluded despite its theoretical relevance. Salary is measured by a single item, reducing measurement precision. The study's R² values (0.25–0.35) indicate moderate explanatory power, leaving substantial unexplained variance. **Potential biases:** The authors' framing consistently positions job embeddedness as superior, which may overstate practical implications given the relatively modest indirect effect sizes. The theoretical argument for Guanxi-based applicability, while culturally grounded, is not directly tested as a moderating mechanism.

Organizational Practice

The study examines organizational working conditions in Chinese social work agencies, including salary levels (average CNY 3,220/month), multi-source work support structures (supervisor, department manager, peers, top leadership), and role stress indicators (resource scarcity, rule ambiguity, task conflict). Social workers in the sample predominantly had tenures of five years or less, held bachelor's degrees, and were concentrated in the 18–30 age group. Organizations in the dataset operated across five Chinese cities with multi-stage random sampling from registered social work organizations.

Strategic Implications

The finding that job embeddedness outperforms job satisfaction as a predictor of turnover intention suggests that PMS frameworks focused primarily on satisfaction surveys or compensation benchmarking may capture only a partial picture of retention risk among relational professionals. The serial mediation pathway (working conditions → embeddedness → satisfaction → turnover) implies that structural integration of employees into organizational and professional networks may precede and condition

affective responses tracked by conventional engagement metrics. The salary-embeddedness non-significance indicates that compensation adjustments alone are unlikely to shift the structural network bonds that most strongly predict retention in this occupational context. The cultural specificity of Guanxi as an amplifier of embeddedness effects raises questions about the direct transferability of Western-derived PMS retention tools to Chinese or other high-relational-network professional contexts.

Validation Status: passed
