Exploring the Causes of Nurses’ Intent to Leave the Job: A Taiwanese Perspective

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study is to explore reasons behind Taiwanese nurses' intention to leave their job. Employing a qualitative approach, we examined the views of eight Taiwanese nurses to determine factors that lead to their intention to leave. From our interview records, we identified that fulfilling employees’ needs, supervisor-subordinate relationship, co-worker interaction, and work atmosphere are the reasons that Taiwanese nurses believe to influence their intention to leave the job. Based on our findings, we recommend healthcare administrators to provide the right services to their nursing staff in order to minimise nurses' intention to leave. We also suggest top management to strengthen collegiality among staff members.

Keywords: Emotions, Cross-cultural behaviour, Interpersonal behaviour, Socialisation

Nurse turnover is one of the most common problems in healthcare organisations around the world, and Taiwan is no exception. As the cost to recruit and to train new professional employees is high, most healthcare administrators would agree that reducing nurse turnover is essential. The topic of intent to leave has attracted both academics and practitioners’ attention in tackling nurse turnover, as an individual’s intention to leave has been found to be a predictor of actual turnover (Stone, Mooney-Kane, Larson, Pastor, Zwanziger and Dick, 2007). A number of factors have been linked with nurses’ intent to leave. However, there is little evidence that demonstrates the impact of interpersonal relations on Taiwanese nurses’ intention to leave the job. Since Taiwanese generally value human interactions (Wang, Chang and Chu, 2006), it is essential that the interpersonal relation aspects are studied in detail. Therefore, we embark on this qualitative study to investigate this issue.

We will first review the literature on nurses’ intention to leave their job. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology of data collection and analysis used in this study. Then, we report our findings and develop a conceptual diagram based on the findings. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of research and managerial implications based on our findings.
LITERATURE REVIEW

For years, nursing has experienced difficulty in staff retention. Nurses’ intention to leave their job has attracted both academics and practitioners’ attention in tackling nurse turnover, as it has been found to predict actual nurse turnover (Lai, Lin, Chang, Wang, Liu, Lee, Peng and Chang, 2008). Factors that significantly influence nurses’ intent to leave their job include hospital ethical climate, control over practice, educational reimbursement, sex, and staff sufficiency (Hart, 2005), organisational climate, nursing experience, and the tightness of the labour market (Stone et al., 2007), nurses’ participation in dialysis provider affairs, nurse manager ability, leadership and support of nurses, and staffing and resource adequacy (Gardner, Thomas-Hawkins, Fogg and Latham, 2007), job satisfaction, general training, kinship responsibilities, employment opportunities outside the hospital, promotional opportunities, and length of service (Price and Mueller, 1981). These factors were identified based on American nurses in various wards, thus caution needs to be taken when generalising the results to Taiwanese nurses.

In their conceptual paper, Newman, Maylor and Chansarkar (2001) noted the factors that led to UK registered nurses’ intentions to leave included “inadequate resources to do the job”, “inadequate pay”, “inadequate opportunities to develop skills”, “inadequate promotion prospects”, “excessive workload”, “inadequate career structure”, and “inflexible working hours”. Since this is a conceptual study and the context is UK, one needs to be cautious when generalising the finding to the Taiwanese nursing context.

Switching the context to Taiwan, Lu, Lin, Wu, Hsieh and Chang (2002) found that intention to leave
the organisation was significantly correlated with marital status, educational level, age of the youngest child, family support, job satisfaction, and professional commitment for hospital nurses in the southern Taiwan. When one leaves their employing organisation, it represents that they also leave their job at the same time. Thus, the findings of Lu et al. (2002) may also indicate the reasons that Taiwanese nurses leave their job. Similarly, Yin and Yang (2002) found that salary and fringe benefits, peer group relationships, leadership style of direct supervisors, level of challenge, and administrative policies were reasons for hospital nurses’ intent to leave a current job.

Although a number of factors have been linked with nurses’ intent to leave their job, the majority of them concern demographics and/or organisational policies. Additionally, there is a limited number of research projects that focus on Taiwanese nurses’ intention to leave their job (Lai et al., 2008). Moreover, it appears from the literature that interpersonal relationships are emphasised by Taiwanese (Wang et al., 2006; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Yet, there is little evidence that demonstrates the influence of interpersonal relations on Taiwanese nurses' intent to leave. Therefore, we undertake this qualitative study to gain a better understanding of Taiwanese nurses’ experiences relative to their intent to leave the job.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

The method for participant selection was purposive because this study set out to explore Taiwanese nurses’ intent to leave their job. Nurses were selected on the basis that they were born, raised, educated in Taiwan and practiced nursing in Taiwan. The research team visited the wards in each participating hospitals and invited the nursing staff to participate in the study. Since there are no precise guidelines
in terms of the number of cases to be included in a qualitative study, the convergent interview technique was adopted. That is to keep adding cases until the theory reaches saturation. In this research, eight interviews were conducted, with saturation occurring at the seventh case. Table 1 indicates characteristics of the participants in this research.

The method of data collection was in-depth personal interviews. A semi-structured interview guide with 20 closed- and open-ended questions was used in the interviews. Table 2 lists all the questions posed during the interview. We designed the interview questions based on a review of previous research on the topic of nurses’ intent to leave. Additional probing questions were interwoven during each interview to seek clarification and explanation. Examples of the interview questions are: “Under what situation will you quit or change your job?”, “What kinds of problems have you come across at work?” The interviews were taped for later transcription.

The method for analysis was in line with the three analysis strategies in Creswell (2007). The first step was transcribing the interviews, so that the interview data are presented in text for analysis. The second step was reducing the data into themes and categories through a process of coding and condensing the codes. This involves reading all transcriptions carefully, jotting down ideas along the read, listing all the thoughts and clustering together similar ideas, then segmenting sentences or paragraphs into categories and labelling those categories with a term. The final step was representing the data in figures or tables.
FINDINGS

Analysis of the interviews resulted in the emergence of four categories and a conceptual diagram that can explain Taiwanese nurses’ intent to leave. The four categories are fulfilling employees’ needs, supervisor-subordinate relationship, co-worker interaction, and work atmosphere.

**Fulfilling employees’ needs**

Fulfilling employees’ needs denote that the employer has met employees’ expectations by providing the type of services (e.g. physical work environment, proper communication) that employees wish for. This is in line with the concept of internal service quality (Edvardsson, Larsson and Setterlind, 1997).

All interviewees agree that whether their needs are fulfilled or not affects their intention to leave the job. Three of them specifically pointed out that they are concerned about promotion, salary, and benefits: “I’d love to stay and keep working in this hospital if they provide better pay, better employee benefits, and more promotion opportunities” (participants 3, 5). “I stay in this hospital because we have great pay and benefits” (participant 7). This consideration is consistent with the findings in Yin and Yang (2002). Others have stressed that: “pay is not the main reason for me to change a job” (participants 1, 4, 6, 8). Cohen (2006) held a similar view to this argument by stating that targeting only salary may not be an effective strategy for nurse retention. One interviewee revealed that: “I like working here because we have good equipments and abundant resources to perform nursing care. We also have bakery, café, canteen, and convenience store within the hospital. They are very handy and bring a variety to our work environment” (participant 8). This suggests that a favourable practice environment could lead to nurse retention, and a similar view can be found in Smith, Hood, Waldman...
and Smith (2005). A similar view toward work equipment is addressed by another interviewee, as she stated that: “I wish we had equipments that can lift patients or move patients for us. Then we can save our energy to perform nursing care rather than wasting it on physical labouring” (participant 5). This concern highlights the issue of work safety, and research has shown that safety concerns influenced the likelihood to continue nursing practice (Cohen, 2006). Finally, one interviewee expressed that: “When selecting which hospital to work in, I am concerned about the head nurse. I mean whether she is fair to her members, whether she is able to teach me new skills and knowledge, whether I can communicate with her rather than just follow her orders” (participant 6). This expression suggests a potential link between supervisor behaviour and nursing staff’s intent to stay, and studies have shown that poor supervisor behaviour is a key factor for nurses’ leaving (Cohen, 2006; Kleinman, 2004; Yin and Yang, 2002).

**Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship**

Supervisor-subordinate relationship is reflected by the closeness between the supervisor and the subordinate, and the degree of closeness varies amongst each dyad. This is in line with the concept of leader-member exchange in the extant literature (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Mueller and Lee, 2002). All interviewees agree that various degree of closeness exists between the supervisor and the subordinate. For example, a number of interviewees stated that: “The head nurse was close to some of the nurses in my ward” (participants 3, 4, 7, 8). Three interviewees revealed that: “I was not close to my head nurse” (participants 3, 7, 8). However, one interviewee stated that: “I was close to my head nurse” (participant 4). This interviewee then illustrated the closeness between her and her head nurse
by showing the friendship they developed: “Sometimes I invited my head nurse to my place for fun; other times she invited me to her place” (participant 4). Aside from closeness in the form of friendship, other interviewees revealed incidents at work. For example, one interviewee expressed that: “I remember one time I made a mistake at work. The head nurse was angry with me and spoke to me in a harsh manner. She then asked me to write a report for the mistake I made. Later on, a nurse who is close to the head nurse also made the same mistake, but the head nurse did not blame her or ask her to write a report. I was not happy about this issue” (participant 8). Moreover, two interviewees illustrated that: “Those (nurses) who were close to the head nurse can change their shifts more easily than those who were distant from the head nurse” (participants 7, 8).

In addition to demonstrating the closeness in the supervisor-subordinate relationship, all interviewees agree that the relationship with their head nurse is a factor that will affect their turnover intentions: “Having a good relationship with my head nurse will make me want to stay, and keep working in this ward” (participant 1). This expression reveals a negative association between supervisor-subordinate relationship and nurses’ intention to leave their job. Although Yin and Yang (2002) acknowledged that supervisor was a factor related to potential turnover among hospital nurses, they did not specify whether a poor supervisor-subordinate relation is associated with nurse potential turnover. This study extends the work of Yin and Yang (2002) by indicating a negative association between supervisor-subordinate relationship and nurses’ intent to leave.

**Co-worker Interaction**

Co-worker interaction is reflected in the relationships found among colleagues. These relationships
can be demonstrated in terms of closeness between colleagues. All interviewees mentioned that they
came close to some of their colleagues after working in a ward for a while. One further illustrated
the interactions with colleagues by stating: “After work, I hung out with those colleagues who I was
close to. We had dinner together or went shopping together, doing things that friends do” (participant
8). Another revealed that: “I became friends with colleagues that I got along well with. We had meals
together and talked about personal issues” (participant 3). The interviewees also mentioned their
interactions with colleagues while at work. For example, one interviewee expressed that: “Sometimes
we need to ask help from colleagues to carry out routine, for example, we need a colleague’s help to
move a patient” (participant 5). Another illustrated that: “I often discuss patient care with one
particular colleague” (participant 8). Therefore, co-worker interaction is not limited to before/after
working hours, but also occurs during working hours.

In addition to the exchanges among colleagues, some interviewees show that relationships with
colleagues affect their intention to leave. For example, one interviewee stated that: “If I couldn’t have
friendship and support from my colleagues, I would want to leave” (participant 3). Two interviewees
stated that: “Relationships with colleagues affect my intention to leave this ward” (participants 1, 2).
Hence, a negative relationship between co-worker interaction and nurses’ intent to leave is revealed in
the interviews. Raabe and Beehr (2003) indicated that co-workers’ ideas and behaviours had an effect
on employees’ thinking and manners, but they did not specify whether co-worker interaction is related
to employees’ intent to leave. This study thus builds on the work of Raabe and Beehr (2003) by
indicating a negative association between co-worker interaction and nurses’ intent to leave the job.

**Work Atmosphere**

Work atmosphere is reflected in the character of the ward. The character of the ward can be expressed as whether the atmosphere is pleasant or not for staff to work in. For example, one interviewee stated that: “We had a pleasant work atmosphere” (participant 4), while another interviewee revealed that: “We didn’t have a pleasant work atmosphere” (participant 2). A different interviewee illustrated work atmosphere in terms of positive or negative: “Some wards have a negative work atmosphere, while others have a positive atmosphere” (participant 1). In addition, one interviewee illustrated work atmosphere in terms of staff members: “We had good work atmosphere. Staffs were supportive and friendly to each other. We were like a family” (participant 4). This comment is consistent with the friendly and supportive work environment Newman et al. (2001) mentioned in their work.

In addition to the definition of work atmosphere, some interviewees believed that a positive relation exists between work atmosphere and supervisor-subordinate relationship. One interviewee stated that: “My head nurse develops good relationships with her members, so we are like a family and our unit has a good work atmosphere” (participant 4). Another interviewee illustrated that: “I don’t have a close relationship with my head nurse, but I know she likes certain members. I don’t like the members favoured by my head nurse, and they don’t like me. So we don’t have a very pleasant work atmosphere” (participant 7). Work atmosphere can also be affected by co-worker interaction, as one interviewee stated that: “If co-workers tend to help each other, the work atmosphere is better” (participant 6). Such comment suggests a positive relation between co-worker interaction and work
atmosphere. Dunegan, Tierney and Duchon (1992) noted that managers and colleagues influenced employee perceptions of climate; however, they did not specify whether supervisor-subordinate relationship and co-worker interaction affect work atmosphere. This study extends on the work of Dunegan et al. (1992) by revealing a positive relationship between supervisor-subordinate relationship/co-worker interaction and work atmosphere.

In addition to the aforementioned relationships, all nurses indicate a positive link between work atmosphere and fulfilling employees’ needs. For example, one interviewee revealed that: “Before I apply for a job in a ward, I will try to find out if they have a pleasant work atmosphere in that ward. A pleasant work atmosphere is important to me” (participant 6). Another interviewee expressed that: “I hope that the ward I am going to work in has good work atmosphere. By that I mean everyone is friendly and nice to me” (participant 3). Wang, Chu, Hung and Chang (2004) recommended healthcare administrators to treat nursing staff as customers and to fill their needs by creating the work environment nurses hope for. However, they did not specify the type of work environment nurses want. This study fills the gap by suggesting the creation of a good work atmosphere to fulfil nurses’ needs.

Except the implicit relationship between work atmosphere and fulfilling employees’ needs, most interviewees indicated that work atmosphere affects their intention to leave a ward. For example, two interviewees stated that: “If work atmosphere is intolerable in a ward, I would want to leave this ward” (participants 2, 6). Hence, a negative relationship between work atmosphere and nurses’ intent to leave is suggested in the interviews. Smith et al. (2005) noted that a favourable practice environment can
minimise nurses’ propensity to leave. Their definition of a favourable practice environment included nurse supervisors, job characteristics, management style, and service quality emphasis. However, work atmosphere was not included in their definition of favourable practice environment. This study extends the work of Smith et al. (2005) by suggesting a negative association between work atmosphere and nurses’ intent to leave.

**Conceptual Diagram**

Findings from the interviews indicate four categories that affect nurses’ intent to leave, namely fulfilling employees’ needs, supervisor-subordinate relationship, co-worker interaction, and work atmosphere. Our findings also reveal relationships amongst these four factors. First of all, a negative relationship exists between fulfilling employees’ needs and nurses’ intent to leave their job. Secondly, the findings indicate a negative association between supervisor-subordinate relationship and nurse intent to leave. Thirdly, a negative relationship exists between co-worker interaction and nurse intent to leave. Fourthly, our results show a positive relation between work atmosphere and supervisor-subordinate relationship. Fifthly, a positive relation is found between co-worker interaction and work atmosphere. A positive link also exists between work atmosphere and fulfilling employees’ needs. However, a negative relationship is indicated between work atmosphere and nurses’ intent to leave. Based on our findings, a conceptual diagram explaining Taiwanese nurses’ intent to leave is thus developed (as shown in Figure 1).

**CONCLUSION**

This research attempts to explore factors that affect Taiwanese nurses’ intent to leave. The findings are
that fulfilling employees’ needs can make the nurses more satisfied with the consequence of them being more likely to stay on the job. In addition, supervisor-subordinate relationship can negatively affect nurses’ intent to leave, but positively affect work atmosphere. Co-worker interaction can also negatively affect nurses’ intent to leave, but positively affect work atmosphere. Work atmosphere can negatively affect nurses’ intention to leave, but positively affect fulfilling employees’ needs. Based on our findings, a conceptual diagram of nurses’ intent to leave is developed. As a major nursing shortage threatens healthcare organisations, it is essential for industry leaders to provide the right services to their nursing staff which may, in turn, result in nurse retention. Our findings also suggest that collegiality play a significant role in nurses’ intent to leave, as we can see from the conceptual diagram that supervisor-subordinate relationship and co-worker interaction can affect nurses’ intent to leave. Hence, top management perhaps would like to hold workshops on enhancing communication skills, teamwork, and/or interpersonal relations to strengthen collegiality among members. Overall, this paper makes original contributions in that it uses a qualitative research approach to establish a conceptual diagram of nurses’ intent to leave that can be used for nurse retention in the Taiwanese context. The major limitation of this research is that it is based on only eight cases. It is suggested that a quantitative survey be conducted on a broader scale to validate this model.

REFERENCES
Dunegan KJ, Tierney P and Duchon D (1992) Perceptions of an innovative climate:


Table 1: Characteristics of the 8 Participants Featured in This Paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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Table 2: Interview Questions

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<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What do you think of your relationship with your supervisor?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Probe: close/distant relationship)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What do you think of the supervisor/subordinate relationship in your working experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Probe: does the relationship satisfy your needs? Does the relationship meet your expectations?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Under what situation will you quit or change your job?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Probe: better pay or employee benefits in another company; family—marriage, baby, parents; unstable work shift)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What factors lead to trusting relationship at work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Probe: frequency of communication with your supervisor, years of working together, managerial support, fair treatment of employees)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. How would you describe firm performance of your organisation?
   (Probe: the hospital is earning good profits; out-patient number; in-patient number; evaluation of your hospital from the government)

6. How well does the service provided by your organisation meet your needs?
   (Probe: the service provided by your organisation such as parking facilities, training, child care, equipment, responsiveness to your needs, respect)

7. What kind(s) of service do you expect to be provided by your organisation?
   (Probe: physical facilities; responsiveness—communication, service orientation, willingness to accommodate; trust, comfortable interpersonal relations, sincere concerns, caring, kindness)

8. How do you find the physical facilities and equipments in your organisation?
   (Probe: good, competent with similar type of hospitals, bad)

9. What kinds of problems have you come across at work?
   (Probe: insufficient communication with supervisors, lack of managerial support for decision-making, not enough training or guidance to do things right initially)

10. How did you respond to the problem(s) at that time?
    (Probe: report to supervisor, talk to co-workers privately, quit)

11. What do you think of your relationship with co-workers?
    (Probe: close/good; bad/distant)

12. How do you work with co-workers towards a problem at work?
    (Probe: come up with a best solution together; let co-workers decide)

13. What is your supervisor’s reaction when you confront a problem at work?
    (Probe: prompt response to assist you; use his/her power to help you; leave you alone)
| 14. | How does your supervisor show his/her satisfaction towards your performance?  
(Probe: say compliments directly to you and/or in front of co-workers; write down on the evaluation; give you a reward) |
| 15. | How does your supervisor show his/her support towards your decision at work?  
(Probe: he/she will bail me out when needed; I feel that he/she is honest and fair with me) |
| 16. | How do you deal with daily tasks?  
(Probe: work with co-workers; work with supervisor; work on my own) |
| 17. | How often do you search for a new job?  
(Probe: once a week, monthly, quarterly, yearly) |
| 18. | What type(s) of alternative job do you search for?  
(Probe: academic teaching, research, administrative, hospitality) |
| 19. | How do you work with your supervisor towards a problem at work?  
(Probe: follow his/her instructions; I can have my opinions and he/she will take my opinions if they are better than his/hers) |
| 20. | What is your feeling towards being treated fairly and honestly by your supervisor?  
(Probe: I feel trust between my supervisor and me) |
Figure 1: A Conceptual Diagram of Taiwanese Nurses’ Intent to Leave

- Co-worker Interaction
- Supervisor-subordinate Relationship
- Work Atmosphere
- Fulfilling Employees’ Needs
- Intent to Leave