



A prospective study of nurses' intentions to leave the profession during their first five years of practice in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Background: Nursing turnover continues to be a problem for healthcare organizations. Longitudinal research is needed in order to monitor the development of turnover intentions to leave the profession over time.

Objective: The objectives were: (1) to investigate the prevalence of new graduates' intentions to leave the nursing profession, (2) to prospectively monitor the development of intention to leave during the first five years of professional life, and (3) to study the impact of sex, age, occupational preparedness and burnout (i.e. exhaustion and disengagement) on the development of intention to leave the profession.

Design: Longitudinal observational study.

Participants: Participants were recruited from first-year nursing students at any of the 26 universities in Sweden offering nursing education. Of the 2331 student nurses who were invited to participate in the study, 1702 (73%) gave informed consent and thus constituted the cohort. This cohort was prospectively followed yearly (three times during education and five times post graduation) from late autumn 2002 to spring 2010. Of the 1501 respondents who continued to participate after graduating, 1417 worked as nurses at the time of data collection and responded to the items regarding intention to leave the nursing profession during at least one wave of measurement; these constituted the sample of the present longitudinal study.

Methods: The outcome variable was intention to leave the nursing profession. This was measured using a scale of three items, covering thoughts of leaving the profession. The main predictor was burnout, and this was measured by the exhaustion and disengagement scale from the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory. Data were analysed using latent growth curve modelling.

Results: After five years, every fifth nurse strongly intended to leave the profession. The longitudinal analysis of change in intention to leave showed that levels increased during the first years of employment. High levels of burnout were related to an increase in intention to leave.

Conclusion: It is important for organizations employing new graduates to pay attention to nurses who show early signs of burnout, and provide a resourceful work environment with a suitable workload, sufficient introduction, management support, satisfactory collaboration with colleagues, and role clarity.

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What is already known about the topic?

- Nursing turnover continues to be a problem at all levels of healthcare organizations.
- Nurses are especially vulnerable with regard to leaving nursing early in their career, and younger nurses are more inclined to have shorter tenure in the profession.
- Stress and burnout have frequently been reported to play an important role regarding intention to leave, and actually leaving the nursing profession.

What this paper adds

- The prevalence of intention to leave the nursing profession generally doubled between the first and fifth year of employment, and after five years every fifth nurse strongly intended to leave the profession.
- During the first five years of practice, increases in intention to leave the profession were associated with concurrent levels of burnout.
- Disengagement prospectively influenced an increase in intention to leave the profession in subsequent years.

1. Introduction

Nursing turnover is a concept that encompasses everything from leaving a position or transferring within a healthcare organization (job turnover) to leaving the profession as a whole (professional turnover) (Hayes et al., 2006a). The present paper focuses on professional turnover intent, as leaving the profession generates a permanent loss of resources and may worsen the shortage of nurses in the long term (Buchan and Aiken, 2008; Buchan and Calman, 2004). In addition, professional turnover also has all the disadvantages of job turnover (leaving a job), in that it is costly, causing shortages and unstable nurse staffing that may compromise patient care (Hayes et al., 2012; O'Brien-Pallas et al., 2006).

Nurses seem to be especially vulnerable with regard to leaving the profession early in their careers (Barron and West, 2005), and younger nurses are also more inclined to have shorter tenure in the profession (Flinkman et al., 2008). Attention has therefore been paid to nurses in the early stages of their career, and it was shown in a Swedish population-based study of three separate cohorts that 10% (in two cohorts) and 20% (in the third cohort) of new graduates strongly intended to leave the profession one year after graduation (Rudman et al., 2010). In the USA, Scott et al. (2008) found that approximately 6% of new graduates intended to leave the nursing profession within the first three years. With respect to new graduates, further research has been called for to illuminate the general situation during the transition from education to practice (Higgins et al., 2010; Newton and McKenna, 2007). Specifically, issues regarding professional development, stress, and overall functioning in the workplace need further exploration.

1.1. Intention to leave the profession

Given the variety of possible exit routes, the rationale behind a decision to leave the healthcare system and the

profession as a whole, is multifaceted (Duffield et al., 2004; Morrell, 2005). In many of the established theoretical models, a turnover decision is viewed as a process that evolves over time, after searching for or evaluating other alternatives (Flinkman et al., 2010; Morrell, 2005). However, a turnover decision can also be made within a very short time period, prompted by one single event (Morrell, 2005). Regardless of a short or long decision process, a strong link has been established between intention to leave the nursing profession and a subsequent decision to actually leave (Hasselhorn et al., 2005; Parry, 2008). According to the theory of planned behaviour, human behaviour in specific contexts can be predicted and explained in terms of intention to take action (Ajzen, 1988, 1991). Here, intention gives an indication of how much effort a person is prepared to exert in order to take action and behave in a certain way. Thus, there is an established association between intention and behaviour. In the case of professional turnover, intention to leave is a significant predictor for actually leaving the profession (Blau, 2007).

1.2. Burnout: one factor associated with professional turnover

Among the many interrelated factors that influence why nurses in general intend to leave the profession, burnout is one that has frequently been found (Flinkman et al., 2010; Heinen et al., 2013). Also, as shown in a longitudinal study on medical technologists, one core component of burnout (i.e. work exhaustion) was found to correlate specifically with occupational turnover, whereas job insecurity significantly correlated with organizational turnover (Blau, 2007).

Burnout symptoms, which are manifested as lack of energy and negative attitudes towards work, are signs of exposure to stress—either prolonged exposure to stress, or extreme levels of stress (Shirom, 2011). Consequently, burnout can lead to depletion of a person's energy resources. Exhaustion constitutes one basic component in burnout; the other component, according to Demerouti et al. (2002), is disengagement (also referred to as depersonalization or cynicism). Exhaustion is defined as a state arising out of intensive strain (physical, affective, and cognitive). Disengagement, on the other hand, refers to a state where a person distances her- or himself from work and develops negative attitudes towards the work (Demerouti et al., 2002).

The two components, exhaustion and disengagement, also constitute the two fundamental outcome components in the job demands-resources (JD-R) model of burnout (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). The JD-R model is used to explain relationships between job characteristics that may impact employee well-being (e.g. exhaustion and disengagement). Moreover, in this model, job characteristics are classified as job demands or job resources. In this context, job demands refer to characteristics of the job that require constant physical and/or psychological effort or skills and are related to certain costs (physiological and/or psychological) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Job resources, on the other hand, represent

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