

Turnover Opportunity and Intention to Leave: The Role of Moral Obligation as A Mediator

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Abstract

The demand for nurses is expected to increase in the coming decades while the supply of nurses is expected to decrease. The situation is worsening when many trained nurses especially in public hospitals are offered with various opportunities that include better perks and higher salaries to serve in the private sector locally and in foreign countries. Consequently, nurses' intention to leave has become an important research topic. This study investigated the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave among nurses in Malaysian public hospitals and the role of moral obligation as a mediator in the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave. The study focused on public hospital nurses in Peninsular Malaysia and limited to testing mediating effect of moral obligation between turnover opportunities and intention to leave. Main findings show that not only turnover opportunity positively relates to intention to leave among Malaysian public hospital nurses, but also moral obligation does play a significant mediating role between the two variables. Thus the findings offer to provide additional views on the issue and should facilitate in drafting better retention strategies.

Keywords : intention to leave, turnover opportunity, moral obligation, nurses

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1. Introduction

Internal migration as well as external migration of nurses for an overall better quality of life has created a gap in the healthcare system and this scenario has adversely affected those most in need especially in developing countries and resource-poor countries (Brush, 2008; Yearwood, 2007; Xu & Zhang, 2005).

Thus, the issue deserves special attention so that healthcare industry will be better prepared in all aspects to face such a phenomenon. As mentioned by McElmurry et al. (2006), nurse migration has created a healthcare crisis in developing countries resulting in inequalities in healthcare, poor health (Yearwood, 2007) and the phenomenon has resulted in the increase of health care costs as well.

In most parts of the globe, there is high demand for health-care employees. This phenomenon has driven health workers to go to employers that can promise better pay and better working conditions. This migration may also result in financial loss and weakens health systems in the places or countries of origin. In Malaysia, the shortage not only occurs in public hospitals, but in private hospitals as well (Malaysian Ministry of Health, 2007) and it has become even more severe as many trained nurses from public hospitals hop over to the private sector or leave to serve in foreign countries due to better offers.

This has proven that the study of intention to leave among nurses in this country is vital. What more when the literature indicates that the study of intention to leave has continuously gained much attention among researchers, while such study in the Malaysian context focusing on nursing field remains limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to further investigate the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave while at the same time identifying the role played by moral obligation as a mediating variable in the study.

It is hoped that the results of this study will enlighten the issue of turnover intention among Malaysian nurses who are working in public hospitals, and thus shed further light on the field under study.

2. Literature Review

Turnover intention is a very complex phenomenon and there are various factors that contribute to it (Bandhanpreet Kaur et al., 2013). Many studies on intention to leave have been conducted to examine intention to leave and factors relating to intention to leave in various fields. In fact, many researchers have attempted to answer the questions of what really determines employees' intention to leave by investigating possible antecedents of employees' intention to leave. Studies have shown that various factors contribute to an employee's intention to leave including personal factors, job related factors, organizational factors and environmental factors

2.1 Turnover Opportunity and Intention to Leave

All over the globe, there is high demand for health care employees including nurses. In developed countries, the demand for this profession is posing a serious challenge to health systems (Pillay, 2007). Not just for developed countries, in fact, literature shows that most countries in the world are experiencing a nursing shortage (Zurn et al.2005) thus, making the nursing profession an opportunity in which employees can engage themselves.

Additionally, Arnold and Feldman (1982), Kopelman et al. (1992) and Steel (1996) argued that perceived opportunities in local market would further promote turnover decision (Mano-Negrin & Tzafrir, 2004) among those who already had the intention to leave.

In other words, the perceptions of opportunities would impede turnover behavior. While Brannon, Zinn, Mor and Davis (2002) revealed that market environment factors including unemployment rate and income were not significant in distinguishing extreme turnover rates among nursing assistants.

Empirical evidence seems to support the previous statement whereby according to McCarthy and Tyrrell (2007), the result of their study among 352 nurses at 10 hospitals in the Republic of Ireland revealed that 96% of respondents who had intention to leave anticipated that there would be no difficulty in finding another job and 79% indicated that it would be 'fairly easy' 'quite easy' and 'very easy' to find another nursing job. 78% of the respondents also indicated that there are 'a great many' nursing jobs available that suit their qualification if they leave their present organization. Looking at the scenario the job market seems to offer turnover opportunity for nurses who are seeking better employer.

2.2 Moral Obligation and Intention to Leave

Moral obligation is also a subject of interest for some researchers to relate it to certain behavioral intention. For example, even though Monin et al. (2008), LaSala (2007), and Goei et al. (2003), did not relate moral obligation with intention to leave, their findings did support that moral obligation had a relationship with or had an impact on the intention of a person to do or not to do something.

Moral obligation was proposed as a mediating variable in this study since it is commonly known that nursing is not the kind of occupation which people enter simply for the financial rewards but rather want to help others - to improve the health and develop autonomy to patients and clients.

Thus, it is believed that moral obligation can influence nurses' intention to stay or intention to leave. Sharkey (1994) and Prestholdt's (1987) stated that moral obligation has influence on intention to leave.

The literature suggests that moral obligation could also predict intention to leave among nurses. This is supported by the results from Prestholdt et al.'s study (1987) whereby their results suggest that moral obligation is also a predictor of nurses' intention to resign or stay. This is further supported by Sharkey (1994) who conducted a study on 215 registered nurses in Nebraska and claimed that nurses who feel a moral obligation to stay express a strong likelihood of staying in their nursing profession.

2.3 Problem Statement

Stable nursing workforce would ensure high quality of nursing care received by patients. Without sufficient number of nurses, prevention and treatment of diseases and advances in health care cannot reach those in need. However, nursing shortage has negated the desire to provide good quality health care needs on the national and global basis. The shortage of nurses especially in public hospitals is exacerbated when nurses are lured by offers from private hospitals or even from hospitals in foreign countries.

In 2009, Malaysia had approximately 75,000 active nurses in the public and private hospitals (Ministry of health, 2009) and 75% of them work in the public hospitals . The number is still insufficient and Malaysian hospitals have been forced to hire foreign nurses to meet the current demand.

The situation worsening when many trained nurses in public hospitals hopping over to the private sector due to better offers and a few other factors like working environment and workload. Malaysia is also losing many experienced nurses to foreign countries.

2.4 Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave among nurses in Malaysian public hospitals.
2. To determine the role of moral obligation as a mediator in the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave.

2.5 Hypotheses

This study hypothesizes that:

H1: Turnover opportunity positively relates to intention to leave among Malaysian public hospital nurses.

H2: Moral Obligation mediates the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave among Malaysian public hospital nurses.

2.6 Scope of the Study

This study attempts to fill the gap as well as to provide relevant and related parties with additional insights into understanding the scenario of turnover opportunity and turnover intention which has attracted attention across professions and settings.

Looking at the global scenario, where most parts of the world are facing nursing shortages, a narrow scope of study on Malaysian public hospital nurses is needed to help produce a better and closer picture of what is really happening in the health care industry in Malaysia, since external as well internal migration of nurses has been a recent phenomenon. Therefore, the study focuses on permanent nurses who are working in public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia – in the four (4) main regions of Peninsular Malaysia

3. Methodology

The respondents of this study were nurses who were permanent staff in major public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia.

In Malaysia, nurses are categorized into five main groups - matron, sister, staff nurse, community nurse and assistant nurses, thus, this study used proportionate stratified random sampling **which** involves dividing the population into homogeneous subgroups and then taking a simple random sample in each subgroup. By doing so, the sample would be able to represent not only the overall population, but also the subgroups of the population. The use of this stratified random sampling could also reduce the potential bias as well as to ensure that the sample would reflect the general population.

To collect the data, survey questions were distributed to respondents. The survey questions were divided into **four major sections**. **Section A** contains questions that ask about the respondents' perceived turnover opportunity; **Section B** asks questions related to moral obligation; **Section C** contains questions that measure the respondent's perceived intention to leave; and the last section, which is **Section D**, requires respondents to provide their personal information details, such as age, gender, race, marital status, education level, position, as well as job tenure.

This twelve-page questionnaire takes the respondent approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

The questions used to measure turnover opportunity were the set of questions that have been used by several researchers including Khatri et al. (2001), and Rahman, Raqvi and Ramay (2008) in their turnover intention study; the questions were adapted from Mowday et al. (1984), Billings and Wemmerus (1983), Arnold and Feldman (1982), and Michaels and Spector (1982). Of those six questions, five questions were positively worded and 1 question was negatively worded.

To measure the respondents' intention to leave, the instrument developed by Hinshaw and Atwood (1984) called Anticipated Turnover Scales (ATS) was used. This self-report Anticipated Turnover Scales (ATS) instrument contained twelve items relating to respondents' anticipated length of time to leave and their certainty of leaving their job. The Anticipated Turnover Scales (ATS) developed by Hinshaw and Atwood was chosen since its reliability and validity testing have been conducted extensively before it was finally published. The internal consistency reliability for the scale was 0.84. Furthermore, this ATS instrument has been used repeatedly and successfully [24] in the study of intention to leave. To measure moral obligation, the existing instrument was adopted from Prestholdt et al. (1987, 1988) and two additional questions were developed and they went through a proper process of developing research items.

700 sets of questionnaires were distributed to major public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia or specifically in Johor, Melaka, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Perak, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. No respondents from Negeri Sembilan were obtained since there was no response from the hospital by the date line. In addition, due to time and financial constraints, the study excluded samples from Sabah and Sarawak.

For the data analysis, SPSS version 17 and the latest SPSS macro was used. Conventional SPSS descriptive was used to explore the data and to transform the data into much more meaningful information, especially for demographic variables. Besides frequencies, standard deviation, mean, minimum and maximum values and range were also examined so that the trends of the data can be explained. Except for demographic variables, hypothesis testing was conducted by applying SPSS macro provided by Preacher and Hayes (2009). This macro was chosen based on the reasons mentioned in the literature which suggested that some updating and upgrading of the former method of analysis is needed.

4. Findings and Discussion

Out of 700 sets of questionnaires distributed, 436 sets were returned. Of those 436 respondents, 38 respondents or 8.7% were from Perlis, 35 respondents or 8.0% were from Perak, and 23 respondents or 5.3% were from Kedah, which represented the northern part of the Peninsular. There were 42 respondents or 9.6% from Kuala Lumpur, 31 respondents or 7.1% from Selangor, and 38 respondents or 8.7% from Melaka, which represented the West Coast of the Peninsular. There were 45 respondents or 10.3% from Kelantan, 49 respondents or 11.2% from Terengganu, and 39 respondents or 8.9% from Pahang, which represented the eastern zone of Peninsular, and 96 respondents or 22% from Johor, which represented the southern Peninsular. However, only 398 were usable.

The results of estimating the direct effect of turnover opportunity on intention to leave can be obtained in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of Estimated Direct Effect of Turnover Opportunity on Intention to Leave

Independent Variable	Coefficient	t	p
Turnover Opportunity	0.076	2.68	0.008*

* Significant at 0.05 significance level

Based on the results shown in Table 1, it was found that the direct effect coefficient for turnover opportunity on intention to leave was about 0.029 (positive) and p value 0.008. Because the coefficient value is positive and the p value < 0.05, it is concluded that turnover opportunity has a significantly positive relationship with intention to leave. Thus, the hypothesis (Turnover opportunity has a positive relationship with Intention to Leave among Malaysian public hospital nurses) is supported.

The result seems to be consistent with Widerszal-Bazyl et al. (2008), Adjei-Appiah (2008), Castle et al. (2007), McCarthy and Tyrrell (2007) who agreed that availability of job opportunities or low unemployment rates is positively associated with intention to leave and turnover. This is because a tight job market would provide more opportunities in the job market.

Additionally, Ing-San Hwang and Jyh-Huei Kuo (2006) revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between perceived job opportunities and intention to leave. Thatcher, Stepnia and Boyle (2003) also found a strong positive relationship between perceived job opportunities and intention to leave.

The findings of Ing-San Hwang and Jyh-Huei Kuo (2006) and Thatcher et al. (2003) were further strengthened by Rahman, Naqvi and Ramay (2008) who found that perceived job opportunities are strongly correlated with intention to leave.

Table 2 depicts the results of estimating the indirect effect of turnover opportunity on intention to leave through the moral obligation.

Table 2: Results of Estimated Indirect Effect and Bootstrapping 95% Confidence Interval (CI) of Turnover Opportunity

Independent Variables	Coefficient	95% CI	
		LL	UL
Turnover opportunity	0.045	0.021	0.075

Note: CI=confidence interval; LL= lower limit; UL=upper limit.

*Significant at 0.05 significance level

Based on Table 2, the indirect effect coefficient for Turnover Opportunity on Intention to Leave through Moral Obligation is 0.045 (positive). Testing the significance it was determined that the true indirect effect was estimated to lie between 0.021 and 0.075 with 95% confidence interval. Because zero is not in the 95% confidence intervals, then the indirect effect is significant at $p < 0.05$. Thus it is concluded that **moral obligation is a significant mediator** for the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave.

The results of the study indicate that turnover opportunity is related to intention to leave and in the context of this study moral obligation is seen to strengthen or to have impact on the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave. In other words, the results indicate that turnover opportunity affects the moral obligation, which in turn, also affects intention to leave.

The results obtained in testing the mediating effect of moral obligation on the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave in this study could not be compared to any previous study since this study failed to locate any previous study that investigated the role of moral obligation on the relationship between turnover opportunity and intention to leave, locally and internationally.

5. Conclusion

The result is believed to clearly reveal that turnover opportunity does relate to nurses' intention to leave and can also be a predictor of turnover intention. Furthermore, from the literature and discussion with several senior nurses who do administration work, it is true that turnover opportunity is also a factor that contributes to nurses' leaving.

The findings of this study suggest that employers should be wary when internal opportunities are limited and external opportunities are abundant. In fact, it is a lot better if employers proactively intervene with additional internal opportunities before their employees begin to consider leaving. Practically, this study is hoped to benefit the nation, learning institutions, related organizations and industry as well. The findings would help the related parties to design appropriate retention strategies or take the necessary action to enhance, upgrade or improve the present scenario in the organizations.

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