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The Pay Challenge

The Case of Social Workers in Singapore

IRENE Y. H. NG, HELEN SIM, REBECCA S. Y. TAN

Pay matters. Using economic theory and empirical data from Singapore, the authors examine the important role of salary in attracting and retaining social workers. Economic theories show the relationship between pay and turnover, and the need for government intervention. Then, by comparing empirical data against the economic theories, the effectiveness of the measures taken by the Singapore government to increase the number of social workers is analyzed. Finally, issues hindering competitive social work pay and recommendations for managing the issues are highlighted.

Key words Social work, salary, Singapore

Introduction

20 January 2007 was the inaugural celebration of Social Workers' Day in Singapore. But one headline in the local newspaper that day was hardly celebratory. Titled "Social Work: Great Job, Pity about the Pay," the article quoted several social workers who spoke about the low pay and punishing hours (Tan, 2007, January 20). One veteran social worker with 15 years of experience earned less than S\$5,000 (US\$3,318) a month and shared how she herself was bordering on a breakdown. A former social worker was earning only S\$2,200 (US\$1,460) after four years and left for an insurance job that paid her S\$3,000 (US\$1,991) a month. The article went on to discuss the challenges to social services as a result of low pay and a demanding workload, including high turnover of staff that led to poor quality in service and long waits for clients.

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Recognizing the challenges of low pay and high turnover in the social service sector, social work remuneration has been featured in national-level political discourse in Singapore over the past two years. In 2007, the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) started the process of raising the professional status of social work through its first celebration of Social Worker's Day. At the celebration, the Minister for Community Development Youth and Sports announced that social workers' salaries would be raised (Tan, 2007, January 20). At the next year's Social Workers' Day, a professionalization package that included sabbatical leave, skills upgrading, and accreditation was announced.

Harsh as it may sound, policy is not interested in the job satisfaction of social workers per se, but only because of its role in attracting and retaining staff. The main agenda of the Singapore government is increasing manpower to meet the growing demands of social services, i.e., body count. This can be achieved on two ends: by injecting more new workers and by preventing existing workers from leaving. Social workers carry the important task of caring for the down-and-out in society. In a globalized economy, the underprivileged as a group is growing and they are facing more complex problems (Ng & Rothwell, 2009). These growing social concerns are increasing demand for social services. While in the past, low job satisfaction and high turnover might have been brushed aside as endemic to the sector, times like these might have prompted a reevaluation of job satisfaction in social service jobs in order to retain good staff. As the Singapore authorities intervene to improve the work conditions for social workers, it is timely to pause and take stock of the current situation and of what really matters to job satisfaction and staff retention. Are social workers really overworked and underpaid? Will the Singapore government's attempts to raise professional standards, revise salaries, and provide respite from work be effective in retaining quality and quantity of staff?

This article follows Singapore as an illustrative case to propose that salary matters more to job satisfaction than is given due attention in current research. First, some gaps—yet possible insights—in existing research are highlighted. Next, economic theory is applied to demonstrate how salary relates to satisfaction, and to discuss the hurdles and bridges for improving job satisfaction through better remuneration. Then, what is happening in Singapore is used as a case study of salary adjustments through government intervention. Finally, the theoretical and empirical findings provide the basis for a critique of the current initiatives in Singapore.

Turnover, Job Satisfaction, and Burnout

The literature on the work conditions of social workers has mostly centered around three interrelated topics: turnover, job satisfaction, and burnout. The literature paints a picture with loose links between pay and these variables. While Jayaratne and Chess (1984) and Dickinson and Perry (2002) found significant associations between salary and turnover, Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne, and Chess (1994) did not. While Barber (1986) found that salary was significantly associated with job satisfaction, many other studies (e.g., Jayaratne & Chess, 1984, on child welfare, family, and community workers; Evans et al., 2006, on mental health Social Workers in England and Wales; Poulin, 1994, on members of the National Association of Social Workers and the Gerontological Society of America) did not.

Similarly, for studies on burnout, an early study by Jackson, Schwab, and Schuler (1986) found that financial rewards were correlated with a reduction in the personal accomplishment subscale of Maslach's burnout inventory. However, later studies either found insignificant correlations between salary and burnout (e.g., Collings & Murray, 1996, on social workers in Northern England; Glasberg, Eriksson, & Norberg, 2007, on healthcare professionals in Sweden; Tam & Mong, 2005, on school social workers in Hong Kong) or did not include salary at all (e.g., Benzur & Michael, 2007, on social workers, nurses, and psychologists; Schwartz, Tiarniyu, & Dwyer, 2007, on clinical social workers).

One reason for the mixed results from salary might be inappropriate specifications due to the lack of a clear theory driving the specifications. In the case of turnover, existing studies have measured turnover simply as leaving one's job. However, Poulin (1994) pointed out that those who are dissatisfied with their salary leave not just their jobs but also the profession. Therefore, the right turnover measure may be leaving the profession, not leaving one job for another.

In the case of job satisfaction, it has been measured mostly with a global likert scale in response to the question, "Overall, how satisfied are you with your job?" However, the theoretical origins seem different. Barber (1986) followed the theory of work motivation by Herzberg (1959), where intrinsic factors lead to job satisfaction and extrinsic factors lead to job dissatisfaction. Salary is among the top six extrinsic factors in Herzberg, and Barber found that it significantly predicted job satisfaction. Lee and Ghoh (2002), on the other hand, followed the Job Characteristic Model by Hackman and Oldham (1980), where five job characteristics—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback from the job—are all important to higher work motivation, effectiveness, and satisfaction. Lee and Ghoh followed the five characteristics closely but also added control variables, including salary. They found that salary was insignificantly related to job satisfaction, and this is not surprising, as salary does not fall in the domain of Hackman and Oldham's model. Hence, although the measure of job satisfaction was the same, the dissimilar theoretical foundations might have led to the different results in Barber and in Lee and Ghoh. With so many possible dimensions included in the global notion of job satisfaction, it is unclear whether respondents are thinking of only intrinsic factors or also of salary satisfaction when asked a general question, "how satisfied are you with your job?"

In the case of burnout, the theory base of burnout as the dependent variable and the factors being considered seem to have diverged. Most burnout studies measured burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). According to Maslach's theory (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), burnout is caused by six mismatches between people and their jobs, namely work overload, lack of control, breakdown in community, absence of fairness, conflicting values, and insufficient reward. However, the focus in these six mismatches has a very different orientation from the huge variety of factors that has been used in existing burnout research. Examples include stress of conscience (Glasberg et al., 2007) and compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). The theoretical link between the factors in these studies and the MBI is unclear. Furthermore, while insufficient reward (i.e., salary) is one of the factors in Maslach's theory, as asserted earlier, some burnout studies did not include salary.

The literature, then, has not shown clear and convincing effects of salary on social workers' satisfaction at work or motivations to leave their jobs. As illustrated, this may be due to specifications ill-suited for a study of remuneration effects. With a brief outline of economic theory and presentation of aggregate data, this essay proposes that salary matters more than the literature suggests. Aggregate level data may be more suitable for illustrating salary effects than individual data in this case, because of the need to show turnover at the profession—rather than agency—level. This article **focuses its implications on policy intervention to improve job satisfaction through salary revision**. More implications for specification can be found in Ng (in press).

Economic Theory

Economic theory provides a helpful framework for understanding how turnover, job satisfaction, and salary are related, and for evaluating the effectiveness of current efforts to overhaul the sector. The Compensating Wage Differential model from labor economics fleshes out the idiom **“if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys.”** The model argues that work effort and salary depend on the interplay between employers' willingness to compensate employees for taking on greater risks and employees' willingness to accept higher pay to take on those risks. Risk in the context of social services could mean a higher load of labor-intensive case work with needy clients. An employee with a passion for people would be willing to receive lower compensation. So would one who has high competence in handling difficult clients, be it through training or experience. However, an individual who is less altruistic or capable needs to be compensated more to take on higher caseloads. Therefore, if there is only one employer, the employer will pay the motivated and capable staff more to take on more “risks” and pay the unmotivated and incapable staff less because it costs the employer incrementally more to motivate them. Given the intrinsic motivations of the kinds of people who are drawn to social work as a profession, the employer does not have to pay the motivated and capable staff very much more, because social workers are willing to accept a less attractive remuneration to help their clients.

However, the model shows that the level of salary acceptable to the social worker is relative to how much an alternative employer is willing to pay. Unfortunately, employers in the social services are often cash-strapped and able to offer only peanuts. Hence, an employer from a related but resource-rich sector is able to entice the passionate and capable employee to join it. **The social services sector is then left with a less passionate and less capable employee who puts in a minimum work effort according to the lower salary. A stressful work nature coupled with poor remuneration affects social workers' job satisfaction** and, in the long run, the quality of staff within the sector. If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys (see Ng [in press] for a full explanation of the model).

According to the model, then, the solution to retaining good staff lies in addressing both **salary and stress**. The current literature has emphasized more the “risk” side of the model, such as supervision and workload. However, the model shows that there is a limit to how much non-salary factors can be utilized in improving staff retention rates within the sector. Remuneration must be addressed.

How might the results of the Compensating Wage Differential model translate in reality? It may mean losing a group of social work graduates at the onset of graduation, with those remaining giving it a go for a few years before moving from one job to another in the sector. They hang on until such a day when they find that the compensation is not worth the long hours and the mental and emotional stress anymore. At this point, they leave social work totally.

Unfortunately, low social work pay is a systemic problem that cannot be overcome except with intervention from a governing authority. Another set of economic theories helps explain why. In particular, two market failure problems in social workers' pay necessitate government intervention. The first is that of a missing market. In the private market, the price mechanism signals demand and supply. However, in social services, recipients of services are often not the payers. Finances are often provided by third-party funders such as the government or philanthropists. Hence, even if there is high demand for services, the number of social workers is limited by the amount of funding. The second market failure problem explains why funding for social services tends to be limited. The benefits of social workers' services can be considered as externalities for the social service agency and funders because they do not yield the returns to their services. Instead, benefits accrue to clients, who pay little or no service fees. Agencies and funders, therefore, tend to underestimate the benefits, as the services are "lost" to clients in the society. Hence, if the job satisfaction of social workers is to be adequately addressed, higher-order intervention is needed.

To these ends, the Singapore government and the SASW seem to have moved in the right direction, and in a way that no other government in the world has ventured. Economic theory informs that these are necessary steps. The next question is whether the implementation in Singapore will be effective in reality, and to what extent. Is the situation worth intervening in the first place? We turn next to empirical data.

Attrition from Social Work

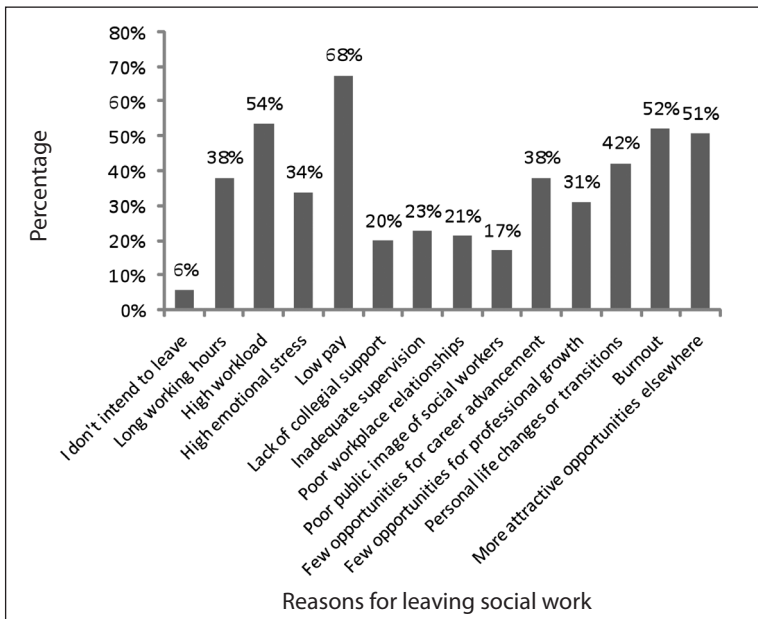
One indicator of attrition is the number of social workers relative to the number of social work graduates. However, these numbers are unknown, and estimations need to be made. As of January 2009, the SASW had 538 members. Assuming that this number represents slightly more than half of all practicing social workers, an overestimation of the number of social workers may be 1,000. What about the number of social work graduates? Professional social work in Singapore began in 1952, when the first batch of eight social work students graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) (Wee, 2002). Today, NUS graduates about 80 students per year. Besides NUS, two other institutions—Monash University and UniSIM—have in the past two years graduated 30 students each. With a total of 140 social work graduates per year, and assuming a linear growth since 1952, an annual average of 74 students $([8 + 140]/2 = 74)$ graduate each year. Assuming a work life of 40 years, there should currently be a pool of 2,960 social work graduates. With an estimated 1,000 practicing social workers, a liberal estimate of the retention rate is about 34%, that is, about two-thirds of social work graduates are estimated to have quit not only their jobs but even the profession completely.

According to the Compensating Wage Differential model, such high attrition rate is accompanied by low salaries and high workload or stress. Indeed, a survey of its members

by SASW in March 2008 corroborated with the model. When asked about the reasons that would cause them to leave the field (Figure 1), a huge proportion of the SASW survey respondents (68%) cited low pay. Other commonly cited reasons included high workload (53%), burnout (52%), and having more attractive opportunities elsewhere (51%). In contrast, people stayed in or were drawn to the profession for altruistic and self-actualization reasons. Figure 2 indicates that the three primary reasons that prompted social workers to join and stay in the field were, firstly, an interest in working with people; secondly, a desire to help the disadvantaged; and finally, a sense of fulfillment from the job (62%). The least cited reasons for both joining and staying included sufficient pay and the positive public image of social work.

Although the response rate of 13% was low, the distribution of respondents into their sectors of work was similar to the distribution of the association’s membership. Most SASW members work in family service centers and fewer work in the government sector. In the survey, the distribution was 48% family, 15% medical, 6% government, and 31% others (which included youth, the elderly, and children). In addition, despite the small sample size, as will be seen, the salary levels were comparable to those published at the national level.

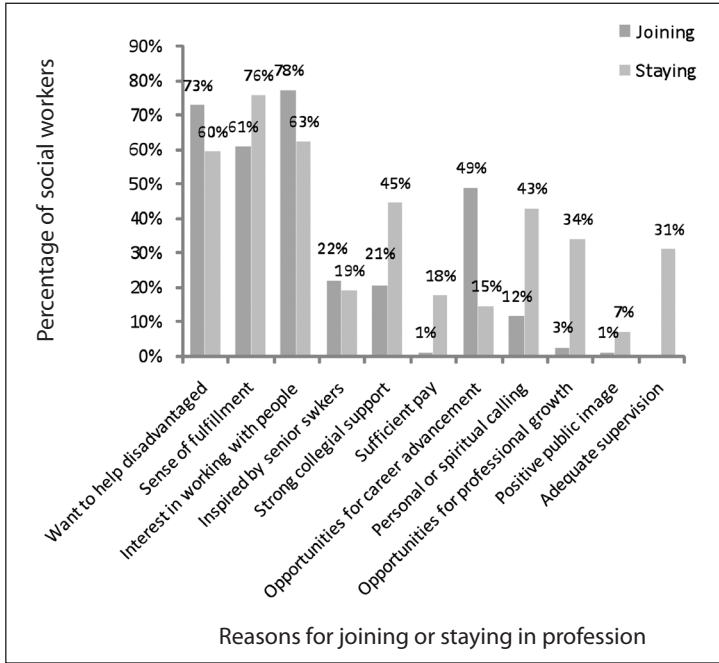
FIGURE 1
Reasons for leaving the profession (N = 67)



Are Social Work Salaries that Low?

Turning to salary levels, the mean monthly salary of the SASW respondents was \$2,985. The median, minimum, and maximum earnings were \$2,500, \$2,000, and \$10,000 respectively. Figure 3 presents the average earnings of social workers according to the number of years

FIGURE 2
Reasons for joining and staying on in the profession (N = 67)

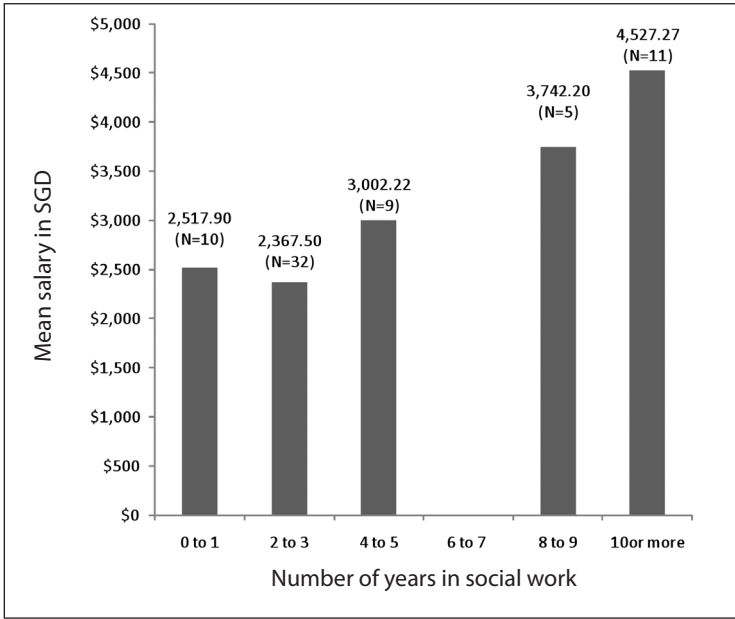


they had spent in social work. The mean monthly wage was only \$4,527 for the 13 who had social workers for 10 years or more. Excluding the outlying case who reported earning \$10,000 lowered the mean wage for the remaining 12 veterans to \$4,336. Although there is a general progression in salary by years of service, the increase is obviously small. Things may be changing for new social workers, as those with a year’s experience or less are paid more than those with two to three years of service.

How has social workers’ salaries fared through time? Lee and Ghoh (2002) found a mean salary of \$1,994 among their sample of 145 graduates between 1996 and 1999 who had taken social work jobs. Trimming the SASW 2008 survey sample to the 51 respondents who had worked five years or fewer gives a more comparable sample to the respondents in Lee and Ghoh. The resultant mean per month earnings of \$2,509 is only \$515 more for a sample that was surveyed about eight years later. This translates into an annual wage adjustment of 2.9%, a rate that hardly keeps up with inflation.

Looking ahead, with the announced salary adjustments, the starting salaries of new entrants should be better. The authors surveyed the 2008 Honors graduates from the National University of Singapore. Out of 49 who graduated in May 2008, 24 who had become social workers responded to the survey. By October 2008, the 24 respondents had mean and median starting salaries of \$2,533 and \$2,500 respectively. This amount is the median amount of the SASW survey, and the amounts are almost the same, whether the respondents were in medical, government, or other sectors. Graduates with Honors degrees earn more than basic degree holders. They would have performed better academically and studied an additional

FIGURE 3
Mean salary of social workers by years in social work (N = 67)



“Honors” year, completing their degrees in four instead of three years. However, the salary difference is not much. For medical social workers, the difference is between \$100 to \$200, depending on the class of Honors. It seems, then, that the salary adjustments have improved starting salaries.

How do these numbers compare with those for other professions and in other countries? Table 1 reports the median monthly salaries of various professions—including social work—

TABLE 1
Monthly gross wage of selected occupations in 2007 (SGD)

	Singapore ^a		United States ^b		U.K. ^c	
	SGD	% of median	SGD ^d	% of median	SGD ^d	% of median
Social work	2,450	61	4,804	80	6,346	85
Professional/ registered nursing	3,369	84	6,957	116	5,551	74
Accounting	3,871	96	6,614	110	7,913	106
Computing	4,237	105	5,703	95	8,168	109
Median of all professionals	4,030		6,004		7,475	

Notes a. Report of Wages 2007 (average of Social Worker and medical Social Worker)
 b. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008
 c. U.K. Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2007
 d. Exchange rates: USD 1.00 = SGD 1.5071 and £1.00 = 3.0161 (Yearbook of Statistics Singapore, 2008)

in Singapore, the U.S. and the U.K. For illustrative purposes, we have included a profession often compared with social work—nursing—as well as more lucrative and popular professions that students sometimes choose instead of social work, namely accounting, engineering, and computing.

The first notable finding is that the median wage of social workers from this table of S\$2,450 is close to the median wage obtained by the SASW survey, an indication that the small survey by the SASW is not far off in the representation of the profession. To the right of each country's salary numbers are percentages relative to the median monthly wage of all professionals. It is clear that social workers are lowly paid in all three countries. However, social workers' salaries in Singapore are much lower than the median compared to that of the U.S. and the U.K. The surveys in all three countries included Bachelor of Social Work as well as Master of Social Work and above social work professionals, but the proportion of social workers with Master's and above degrees is probably lower in Singapore. Still, it is striking that social workers in Singapore earn only 60% of the median professional's wage. In fact, the Report of Wages in Singapore 2007 lists social workers and medical social workers as the second and fifth lowest paid among professionals. And before 2006, social workers were not even categorized as professionals, but as semi-professionals.

Among the professionals in Table 1, nurses are probably the most comparable to social workers, and they earn considerably more than social workers. In Singapore, one profession that many social work degree holders join instead of social work is teaching. The average salary of teachers is not published in Singapore. However, the Ministry of Education publishes the starting salaries, and the amount in comparison to social work is very telling. In 2008, teachers' starting salary was \$2,600 for basic degree holders and \$2,750 to \$2,900 for Honors degree holders (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2008). Compare these to the median amount of \$2,500 in both the SASW and 2008 Honors cohort survey, and the disparity is clear.

Discussion

In summary, the empirical data shows that in Singapore, both the level of and increment in social work salary have been low. The data also shows that the inadequate remuneration, a demanding workload, and better opportunities elsewhere seem to have contributed to the high attrition. However, things also seem to be improving. From the celebration of social workers to a minister's announcement of salary revision and a professionalization package, to the Report of Wages recognizing it as a profession, to the higher salaries of the most recent graduating cohort, Singapore has improved social workers' remuneration and work conditions.

However, catching up with the salaries of other occupations seems an uphill task, given the gap in resources between social service agencies and other types of employers. As social workers in Singapore rejoiced over the wage increment announcement, the joy was dampened five months later. In July 2007, it was announced that civil service salaries would be increased by between \$170 to \$620. As an illustration, an engineer with a good Honors degree (i.e., Second Upper Honors and above) would get \$3,190 instead of \$2,570 and an

economics graduate would get \$3,320 instead of \$2,850 (Lee, 2007, May 22). Compared to the mean salary increment of \$341 for new social workers, these announced increases have pulled other salaries further ahead. According to the Compensating Wage Differential model, it is not simply the level of salary that induces social workers to leave but the difference in wage. These alternative professions are more attractive, and indeed teaching and the civil service have been close substitutes to direct social work practice.

Given the market failure problems in social services, raising social workers' salaries cannot be left to market forces. Government intervention is needed. In Singapore, at least, raising the status of social workers through their professional recognition and salary is not a far-fetched ideal, because the Singapore government has done it before with the teaching profession and the civil service. In many countries, teaching does not pay well, and the reasoning is the same as that for social work—teaching is a calling and therefore low salaries are understandable. However, the Singapore government has chosen to raise the professional status of teachers through raising their salaries and training rigor. Education is felt to be crucial to training human resources, a most precious if not the only resource available to this small island country. Similarly, the Singapore government benchmarks its civil service salaries to the private sector to prevent corruption and retain talent in the government sector. Therefore, with the concerted commitment of resources, the Singapore government has shown that the market failure problem of poor funding resulting in insufficient manpower can be overcome.

With social work, the Singapore case shows that the government here has taken that first important step in improving the work conditions of social workers. However, efforts need to be more substantial. For the initial efforts to be effective in attracting and retaining competent and passionate social workers, we offer three areas that the government and the SASW need to work on besides pumping more money for social work salaries.

First, according to the Compensating Wage Differential model, intervention should raise relative, not absolute, wages. Therefore, it is not only what the government does for the social work profession but also what it does for other professions that will prove effective in attracting and retaining staff in the end. The question then is: Relative to other occupations, how much value does society and the government place on the work of social workers? As long as other professionals are more valued than social workers, social work salaries will continue to trail others, even with government intervention. The value of civil servants and teachers is clear for nation building and human capital development. What about social workers? With the trends of globalization and widening inequality, this could be a time when key decision makers are more willing to recognize the contributions of social workers, who are the frontline safety net to bottom income earners. The recognition cannot simply be in absolute dollars and cents, but relative to other professions. At some level, it is a given that social workers' passion for people and altruism can sustain them and keep them from jumping ship to other sectors where they may be less inclined. However, where the wage differential with other professions is large, it takes an extremely driven individual to persevere in social work in the long run.

That said, the coordinating of social work salaries is more challenging than coordinating the salaries in the education and civil services. This is because social workers are hired by a

much more varied plethora of agencies, which are funded by different types of organizations. While more challenging, restructuring salaries is nevertheless necessary. It will require greater cooperation between policy makers, the professional association, and agencies employing social workers.

The second area requiring further and careful consideration is quality. Besides higher salaries, the Compensating Wage Differential model also suggests the need for maintaining or improving quality. Another way that the government is attempting to increase the manpower needs in the social service sector is to work with tertiary institutions to offer more social work and related degrees, and other professional courses that train para-professionals and convert other professionals to social workers. These educational programs often have lower admission requirements than existing programs. In fact, some train only associates and not degree-level social workers. While effective in increasing body counts, it seems self-defeating that the problem of high attrition of high-quality workers is being addressed by replacing them with less qualified workers. While such programs are necessary to expand the pool of trained professionals in social services, the argument here is that commitment to retaining well-trained, competent, and highly-motivated staff must be given priority.

Third, funding models should be revised. While it is not within the scope of this paper to delve at length into funding models, we highlight two practical issues with current funding practices that are likely to impact social workers' remuneration, agencies, and service recipients in the longer term. The first is the common practice of block grants, which causes service providers to keep costs as low as possible, one of which is labor cost. Without resorting to legislation, one way to overcome this might be to stipulate a reasonable proportion of funds allocated specifically to manpower, which varies according to the qualifications, experience, and track record of staff. The second relates to current funding trends towards rewarding novel and new projects rather than proven longer-term and stable projects. This creates relatively short-term, ad-hoc, and project-basis injection of funds to agencies. As agencies are never sure if they are able to raise the same or higher amount of funds to ensure program continuity on the same scale, it becomes difficult for the agencies to chart a stable career progression for staff, much less plan good and reasonable increments.

One suggestion then is to look at ways to enhance long-term partnerships between agencies and funders within funding models. The certainty of longer-term partnerships on worthy projects allows agencies to factor in reasonable increments for competent staff and chart their career progression reasonably. It also allows space and time for agencies to continually improve and tweak current projects rather than creating new projects for the sake of agency sustenance. All things considered, the intricacies involved in deriving a sound funding model for the social service sector need to be acknowledged. The ways to achieve balance in the interests of service recipients, agency staff, funders, while ensuring public accountability in funding models warrants further research to sieve out helpful funding practices.

Conclusion

It seems calculative to harp on monetary returns for a profession that cares for the needy, but the unsung heroes have trudged on too long without the commensurate financial rewards.

This article has shown through theory and data that satisfaction at work is tied to salary, even for a helping profession like social work. While more research is needed to study the consequences on service delivery of low salaries and high turnover, a point can be made that looking out for the well-being of social workers is not just for self-interest, but more importantly, also for the well-being of the vulnerable populations they work with. Improving the job satisfaction of social workers can reap the abundant benefit of improving the well-being of their clients, who tend to be overlooked by society. The initiatives in Singapore to improve work conditions of Social Workers through salary adjustment and professional development can be lessons for other countries.

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