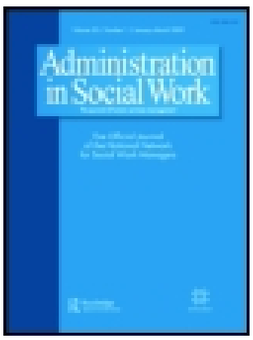

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Burnout and Turnover Intention Among Social Workers: Effects of Role Stress, Job Autonomy and Social Support

Hansung Kim, PhD, MSW
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ABSTRACT. This study examines the main and interactive effects of role stress, job autonomy, and social support in predicting burnout and turnover intention among social workers. This study included a subsample of 346 social workers identified from a cross-sectional random survey of 1,500 California state-registered social workers. Adjusted for age, gender, organizational tenure, and annual salary, structural equation analyses revealed that role stress had a positive direct effect on burnout. The variables of social support and job autonomy had a negative direct effect on turnover intention, but not on burnout. Results showed that job autonomy interacted with role stress in predicting burnout, while social support interacted with role stress in predicting turnover intention. Study results suggest that creating decentralized job conditions is essential for preventing burnout, and that building supportive job conditions is needed to retain social workers who are experiencing high role stress.

KEYWORDS. Job conditions, burnout, turnover intention, social workers

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BACKGROUND

Social workers have demanding jobs. In a recent report on the difficulties of the social work profession, job demands included increasing paperwork, unmanageable caseloads, and problems with difficult clients, as well as staff shortages and reduced availability of adequate supervision (Center for Workforce Studies, NASW, 2006). At the same time, confusing legislation and concomitant guidelines have increased the conflicting and incompatible demands on social workers (Bransford, 2005). Previous literature on burnout has suggested that these demanding job conditions are significant antecedents of social worker burnout (Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt, & Warg, 1995). Furthermore, workers who feel burned out and frustrated with their jobs are more likely to have higher turnover and be absent from work (De Croon et al., 2004). Social worker turnover is a serious problem for social work administration because social worker turnover negatively affects the quality, consistency, and stability of client services (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Specifically, worker turnover not only causes psychological distress in remaining staff members or in new and inexperienced workers who fill vacated positions (Powell & York, 1992), but it leads to client mistrust of the system (Geurts, Schaufeli, & De Jonge, 1998) and financial problems for the organization (Kompier & Cooper, 1999). In light of the implications of burnout and high turnover rates in the social work profession, two crucial questions for human service managers and social work researchers arise: How do we prevent burnout among staff and how do we retain workers?

Previous models of job stress (e.g., Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Demerouti et al., 2001) have suggested that two critical job conditions influence job strain outcomes (i.e., burnout and turnover intention): job demands (e.g., role stress) and job resources (e.g., social support, job autonomy). The extant research has shown that both job demands and resources have unique main effects on workers' burnout and turnover intention (Houkes et al, 2003; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt, & Warg, 1995; Um & Harrison, 1998). Another group of studies have focused on understanding how job demands and job resources interact in explaining burnout or turnover intention (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Dollard et al., 2000; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2004; Posig & Kickul, 2003). Studies that focus on interaction effects of job conditions are based on the buffering hypothesis, which postulates that the relationship between role stressors and strain outcomes will be weaker for those in work places with resources to better cope with stress (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

Despite the significant contribution of many studies, few have examined both main and interaction effects of job conditions on turnover intention within the framework of burnout. In order to retain social workers who are experiencing emotional distress at work, it is important to look beyond the burnout experience and to determine how specific job conditions affect a worker's decision to leave his or her job. Therefore, the simultaneous consideration of main and interaction effects of job conditions on burnout and turnover intention in a single conceptual model is critical to understanding the relationships between job conditions, burnout, and turnover intention among social workers.

The purpose of this study is to examine both main and interaction effects of role stress, job autonomy, and social support on burnout and turnover intention. Testing both main and interaction effects allows for us to have a more comprehensive examination of burnout and, ultimately, turnover intention among social workers in organizational settings. A model of hypothesized relationships is empirically examined through structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout and Turnover Intention

The term *burnout* was introduced to refer to a phenomenon observed among human service workers who had to deal with emotionally demanding individuals. Since then, the majority of burnout studies have been based on Maslach and Jackson's (1986) conceptualization of burnout. Their definition of burnout has three components: emotional exhaustion (feelings of being overextended and depleted of emotional and physical resources), depersonalization or cynicism (negative or excessively detached responses to various aspects of the job), and diminished personal accomplishment (feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement at work). According to theoretical frameworks of burnout (e.g., Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Demerouti et al., 2001), burnout is a key mediator of the relationship between chronic job stressors and various attitudinal outcomes. Among these outcomes is turnover intention, which has been empirically supported as a key outcome of burnout by several studies (Harrington et al., 2001; Huang, Chuang, & Lin, 2003).

Antecedents to Burnout and Turnover Intention

Much of the research conducted on job stress has examined role stress, job autonomy, and social support as job conditions that have been linked to burnout and turnover intention (Um & Harrison, 1998; Mor Barak et al., 2001). The following summarizes the literature on these concepts.

Role Stress

Comprehensive reviews of the burnout literature have consistently suggested that social workers are more likely to feel burned out when they perceive higher levels of role-related stress, which is characterized by a worker's high role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload (Söderfeldt, Söderfeldt, & Warg, 1995). The theoretical framework of burnout proposed by Cordes and Dougherty (1993) explains that role-related stress is directly related to emotional exhaustion. Research consistently shows that a worker's level of emotional exhaustion is greatly affected by the nature and intensity of stress in the work environment. A worker who is experiencing higher levels of emotional exhaustion is more likely to have depersonalized attitudes towards his or her clients and lack of personal accomplishment at work (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). This view of how burnout develops explains how higher role stress results in higher levels of not only emotional exhaustion but also depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment (Bakker et al., 2002; Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, & Mutanen, 2002). In addition to burnout, role stress also has been associated with turnover intention among human service workers (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Therefore, it is expected that role stress, which is characterized as high levels of role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload, is positively associated with burnout as well as with turnover intention among social workers.

Job Autonomy

The concept of job autonomy can be defined as the degree of control a worker has over his or her own immediate scheduling and tasks (Liu, Spector, & Jex, 2005). Relationships between perceived job autonomy and workers' psychological outcomes have been widely discussed in the literature. According to several conceptual papers, the lack of job autonomy reduces personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schafeli, & Leiter, 2001) and engenders a depersonalized attitude among workers (Crodes & Dougherty, 1993). In addition, research shows that burnout is triggered by

individual perceptions of lack of control on the job (Glass & Mcknight, 1996) and the lack of involvement in decision-making (Posig & Kickul, 2003). Job autonomy also has been found to be associated with turnover intention among workers. Spector's (1986) meta-analysis on the effect of perceived autonomy showed that greater perceived autonomy decreased the likelihood of a worker quitting his or her job. Therefore, it is expected that job autonomy is negatively associated with burnout as well as turnover intention among social workers.

Social Support

Social support can be generally defined as the supportive interactions or exchanges of resources between people in both formal and informal relationships (House, 1981). In the context of job settings, social support has been found to be a working condition that reduces the negative effects of job-related stress (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Evidence suggests that perceived social support in the workplace decreases the likelihood of worker burnout (Houkes et al., 2003) and turnover intention (Mor Barak, et al., 2001; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005). Therefore, it is expected that perceived social support is negatively associated with burnout and turnover intention among social workers.

Interacting Effects Between Role Stress, Job Autonomy, and Social Support

Interacting effects between role stress, job autonomy, and social support in predicting job strains have been widely discussed in the literature. The job demand-control (JDC) theory of job stress (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and the expanded job demand-control-support (JDCS) model (Johnson & Hall, 1988) predict that workers who are in job conditions that combine high demands, low control, and low support are at the highest risk for psychological disorder. The risk of psychological stress can be mitigated, however, by altering factors in the workplace. The job demands-resources (JD-R) model of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001) suggests that job autonomy and social support moderate the relationship between role stress and burnout. While many studies have shown that social support and job autonomy provide a buffer between job stress and burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Kickul & Posig, 2003), there has been little attention paid to the interacting effects of job conditions in predicting turnover intention. It is generally agreed that supportive working conditions help workers to cope with job stress and

consequently cause workers to feel a sense of attachment to their current organization (Dollard et al., 2000). Based on this idea, Nissly, Mor Barak, and Levin (2005) found that social support buffers negative effects of work-family conflicts on turnover intention among child welfare workers. In applying the JDCS model of job stress and JD-R model of burnout, this current study hypothesizes that social workers experience higher levels of burnout and turnover intention when job stress is high and when job autonomy and social support are limited.

A Proposed Hypothetical Model

Based on the literature review, the following relationships between job conditions and burnout and turnover intention are hypothesized:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Role stress will be positively associated with burnout (H1-a) and turnover intention (H1-b).
>
> *Hypothesis 2:* Job autonomy will be negatively associated with burnout (H2-a) and turnover intention (H2-b).
>
> *Hypothesis 3:* Social support will be negatively associated with burnout (H3-a) and turnover intention (H3-b).
>
> *Hypothesis 4:* Job autonomy will moderate the relationship between role stress and burnout (H4-a) and the relationship between role stress and turnover intention (H4-b).
>
> *Hypothesis 5:* Social support will moderate the relationship between role stress and burnout (H5-a) and the relationship between role stress and turnover intention (H5-b).
>
> *Hypothesis 6:* Burnout will be positively associated with turnover intention (H6).

To test the above hypotheses, a hypothetical model was developed based on the previous models of burnout including Cordes and Dougherty's (1993) integrative model of burnout, Moore's (2000) partial mediating model of burnout, the JDCS model of job stress (Johnson & Hall, 1988), and the JD-R model of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). First, testing the hypotheses H1-a, H2-a, H3-a, and H6 is based on a traditional mediating

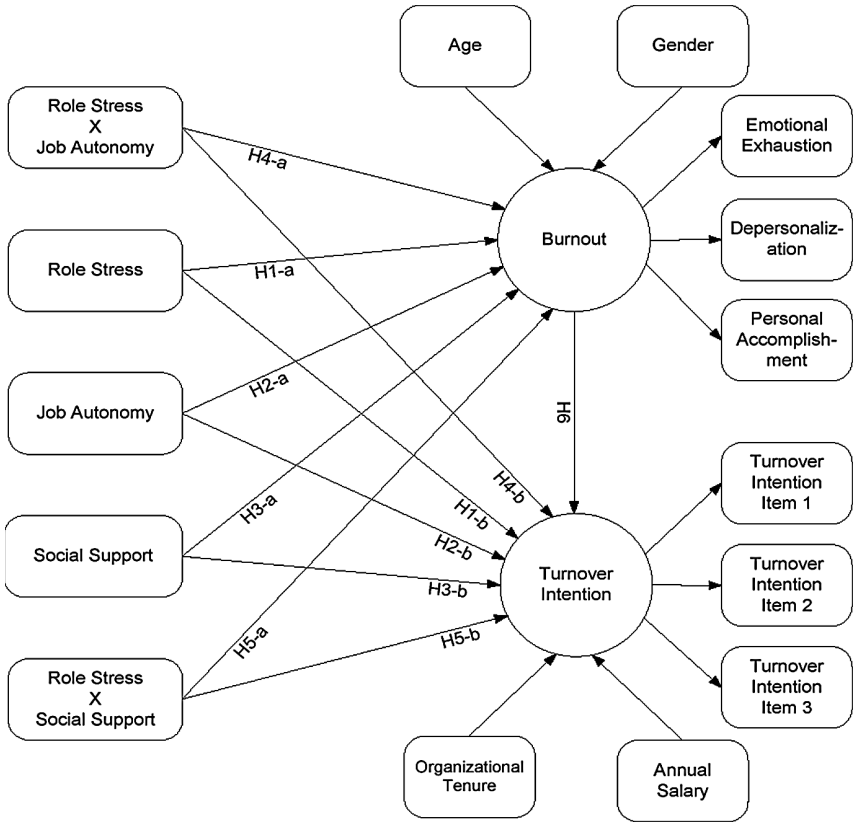
model of burnout (e.g., Cordes & Dougherty, 1993), which hypothesizes that effects of job conditions on turnover intention are fully mediated by burnout. It means that job conditions have direct effects on burnout, and burnout affects turnover intention, but job conditions do not have direct effects on turnover intention. Second, indirect effects of job conditions on turnover intention (H1-b, H2-b, H3-b) are included in the hypothesized model based on Moore's (2000) partial mediating model, which suggests that burnout does not fully mediate the effect of job conditions on turnover intention. This means that job conditions have unique effects not only on burnout but also on turnover intention. Third, interacting effects between role stress and job autonomy and between role stress and social support in predicting burnout (H4-a, H5-a) and turnover intention (H4-b, H5-b) are tested based on the JDCS model of job stress (Johnson & Hall, 1988) and the JD-R model of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). In addition, there have been several studies identifying the importance of demographic factors in explaining worker burnout and turnover intention. For example, Brewer and Shapard's (2004) meta-analytic review of burnout studies reports age as a negative correlate of worker burnout. Jackson (1993) also found that gender is a significant demographic factor of burnout. Other studies suggest that workers having a shorter organizational tenure (Somers, 1996) and higher dissatisfaction with salary (Curpall et al., 2005) are more likely to quit their jobs. Therefore, in order to develop a more valid and complete model of turnover, intention, age, gender, organizational tenure, and annual salary have been included in the hypothetical model as control variables. As a result, figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships between key constructs and control variables together. The proposed model allows us to test both main and interacting effects of job conditions in predicting burnout and turnover intention in a single conceptual framework.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedures

For the study's cross-sectional survey design, 1,500 registered social workers were randomly selected from the total population of state-registered social workers working in California (N = 21,518). Each social worker was mailed a survey instrument, an introductory letter, an information sheet, and a return postage-paid envelope. Of the 529 questionnaires

FIGURE 1. A Hypothetical Model of Burnout and Turnover Intention.



returned, 51 were ineligible because respondents were currently retired or working in other fields (43), had registered after the data collection period (5), or had failed to answer a significant number of questions (3). From the original sample of 1,500, 478 questionnaires were eligible, yielding a survey response rate of 32 percent. Considering that 20 percent of licensed social workers are not active in the field according to a recent report by the Center for Workforce Studies, NASW (2006), a 32 percent survey completion rate seems to be reasonable.

This study used only a subsample of 346 social workers working in organizational settings by excluding 132 full-time or part-time private practitioners. The 132 private practitioners were excluded since this study

mainly focused on social workers' turnover in organizational settings. Licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) represented 58.4% (n = 202) of selected registered social workers working in organizational settings, and 41.6% (n = 144) were associate social workers (ASWs). Mental health was the largest practice area for active, registered social workers in California, representing about 43% of respondents. Medical health (23.5%), child welfare/family (17.2%), and school social work (7.8%) were the next largest practice areas represented. The mean age of all respondents was 45 years old, and the average number of years in the field of social work was 16 years. For ethnic groups, the survey percentages were as follows: 68.0% (231) Caucasian, 11.8% (41) Latino, 9.2% (31) Asian American, and 5.0% (17) African American. The average annual wage of respondents was about $57,000. Respondents reported that they voluntarily changed jobs an average of 3.7 times during their career in the field of social services.

Measures

Role Stress

Role stress was assessed by using three standardized scales of role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload. Role conflict (RC) and role ambiguity (RA) were measured using a shortened form of the role conflict/role ambiguity questionnaire (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Participants were asked to respond to the six-item RA and eight-item RC scales by indicating the degree to which the condition applied to them on a seven-point scale ranging from "very false" (1) to "very true" (7). Cronbach's alpha for the internal consistency and reliability for this sample was 0.88 for the RC scale and 0.84 for the RA scale. Role overload was measured by a five-item scale of work overload specifically designed to measure workload among human service workers (Caplan, Cobb & French, 1975; Lait & Wallace, 2002). This scale also employed a seven-point, Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). The Cronbach's alpha for its internal consistency and reliability was 0.82.

Job Autonomy

Job autonomy was assessed by a three-item subscale of decision authority from the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) (Karasek, 1985), a self-administered instrument designed to measure social and psychological job characteristics using statements such as "My job allows me to make a

lot of decisions on my own" (Karasek et al., 1998). These items were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). Substantial theoretical and empirical work has supported the reliability and validity of the JCQ measure (Karasek et al., 1998), and the Cronbach's alpha for this study was 0.73.

Social Support

Social support was measured by House and Wells' (1978) social support measure, which has been widely used in work settings because it is brief and specifies a variety of sources (e.g., supervisor, coworkers, top manager) and types of social support (e.g., emotional, instrumental, and informational) (Deeter-Schmelz & Ramsey, 1997). Emotional support is the availability of a person or persons who can listen sympathetically when an individual is having problems and can provide indications of caring and acceptance. Instrumental support involves practical help when necessary, such as assisting with transportation, helping with childcare, and providing tangible aid. Informational support is defined as providing knowledge useful for solving problems, such as information or advice, and guidance about alternative courses of action (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000). Three major sources of social support at work were identified as top manager (or administrator), immediate supervisor, and coworkers (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which their immediate supervisor, co-workers, and top manager provided each type of support in the workplace. All items were rated on a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from "not at all" (0) to "very much" (4). A social support score was computed by averaging all 18 questions (six questions for each source). The Cronbach's alpha for the social support scale was 0.95.

Burnout

Burnout among social workers was assessed using Maslach's Burnout Inventory–Human Service Survey (MBI–HSS; Maslach & Jackson, 1986), which measures burnout components by asking about the frequency with which workers experience feelings related to each aspect of the burnout syndrome. It includes nine questions on perceived emotional exhaustion, five questions on depersonalization, and eight questions on personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Each statement is rated on a seven-point continuum from "never" experienced (0) to experience "every day" (6). Acceptable levels of reliability and validity have

been reported for the MBI (Hallberg & Sverke, 2004). For a sample of social service workers, the MBI showed internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.71 to 0.90) and test-retest reliability (two- to four-week intervals for all scales, ranging from 0.60 to 0.82) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Cronbach's alpha for this current study was 0.91 for emotional exhaustion, 0.75 for depersonalization, and 0.79 for personal accomplishment.

Turnover Intention

Organizational turnover intention was measured by the following three items from the four-item scale of intention to leave (Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005): "In the next few months I intend to leave this organization," "In the next few years I intend to leave this organization," and "I occasionally think about leaving this organization." These items were rated on a seven-point, Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), for which the Cronbach's alpha was 0.76.

Control Variables

The questionnaire included questions about respondents' age, gender, organizational tenure, and annual salary. Organizational tenure was assessed by asking the number of years the respondent has worked at his or her current employing organization. The measure of annual salary reflects respondents' total yearly income from their current job.

Analysis

There were missing data for all study variables except gender, with the turnover intention scale having the highest percentage (3.8%) of missing data. Missing values were replaced by plausible values based on the multiple imputation method using the Windows freeware, NORM (Schafer, 1999). Multiple imputations involve a regression approach and a data-augmentation algorithm to impute missing values. Following the method described by Olsen and Schafer (1998), we created three imputed data sets and obtained a single-point estimate by averaging across the estimates from the data sets. Bivariate outliers were examined through a series of scatter plots, revealing two cases that seemed to be bivariate outliers. These cases, however, were not significant multivariate outliers based on the squared Mahalanobis distances at the 0.001 level (Kline, 1998). Based on these results, these two cases were also included in the analysis, which resulted in the skew ranged between −1.45 and 1.56.

Kurtosis ranged between −1.88 and 2.22, so practically normal distributions were assumed for all variables.

After screening the data, structural equation analyses using the Amos program (Arbuckle, 1997) were conducted with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. Unlike multiple regression or ANOVA, the structural equation modeling approach acknowledges the presence of measurement error and provides a means of adjusting for it. First, composite scores for role stress, job autonomy, and social support were calculated for all respondents. These composite scores were mean-centered in order to prevent multicolinearity, and the interaction terms were computed from these centered variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Second, as suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to test a measurement model that included two latent variables (i.e., burnout and turnover intention). Once the measurement model was estimated and a convergent and proper solution was derived, a third step involved assessing a series of structural equation models based on the proposed conceptual model. To evaluate model fit, the χ^2, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI) and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) were examined. The conventional overall test of fit in structural equation analyses assesses the magnitude of the discrepancy between sample and fitted covariance matrices. The χ^2 for a single model is interpreted as the test of difference between the hypothesized model and the identified model with a smaller value indicating better fit (Kline, 1998). However, the χ^2 is sensitive to sample size. Therefore, a value of χ^2/df was reported together and a value of χ^2/df less than 3 indicated a reasonable fit (Kline, 1998). GFI evaluates the relative amount of variances and covariances in the observed covariance matrix that are reproduced by the model-implied covariance matrix, while CFI evaluates the improvement from a less restrictive model to a more restrictive model. Although many other indices can be found in the literature of SEM, these two indices have been promoted as robust and general (Tanaka, 1993). For both the GFI and CFI, a value of 0.90 was considered acceptable (Kline, 1998). Finally, RMSEA values below 0.05 are good fit, and between 0.05 and 0.08 are considered acceptable (Kline, 1998).

RESULTS

For the purpose of helping researchers who may want to replicate the SEM analyses, Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and

TABLE 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for observed variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. RS	1.00														
2. JA	−.40*	1.00													
3. SS	−.27*	.13*	1.00												
4. RS x JA	.04	.13*	.12*	1.00											
5. RS x SS	−.09*	.11*	−.12*	.06	1.00										
6. EE	.64*	−.29*	−.24*	−.07	−.07*	1.00									
7. DP	.40*	−.18*	−.03	−.03	−.05	.56*	1.00								
8. PA	−.22*	.27*	.05	−.06	.09	−.27*	−.34*	1.00							
9. TI1	.31*	−.31*	−.26*	−.13*	−.15*	.37*	.11*	−.21*	1.00						
10. TI2	.24*	−.19*	−.11*	−.05	−.14*	.27*	.12*	−.14*	.47*	1.00					
11. TI3	.37*	−.29*	−.27*	−.06	−.10	.39*	.22*	−.18*	.51*	.60*	1.00				
12. Age	−.01	.02	−.08	−.01	.02	−.09	−.12*	.13*	.02	−.03	.11*	1.00			
13. Gender	−.01	−.01	−.06	−.09	.06	.03	−.08	−.03	.10	.02	−.03	−.24*	1.00		
14. Tenure	−.01	.01	−.06	−.04	−.01	−.04	−.05	.01	.03	.05	.15*	.57*	−.19*	1.00	
15. Salary	.02	.03	−.01	−.01	.03	−.03	.03	.05	−.11*	−.14*	.02	.29*	−.26*	.43*	1.00
Mean	12.06	15.56	10.72	−4.47	−1.66	2.87	1.48	4.80	2.43	4.25	4.55	44.46	.82	8.05	57.54
SD	3.06	3.67	2.00	11.91	6.66	1.27	1.12	.79	2.04	2.28	2.01	11.84	.39	7.73	16.82

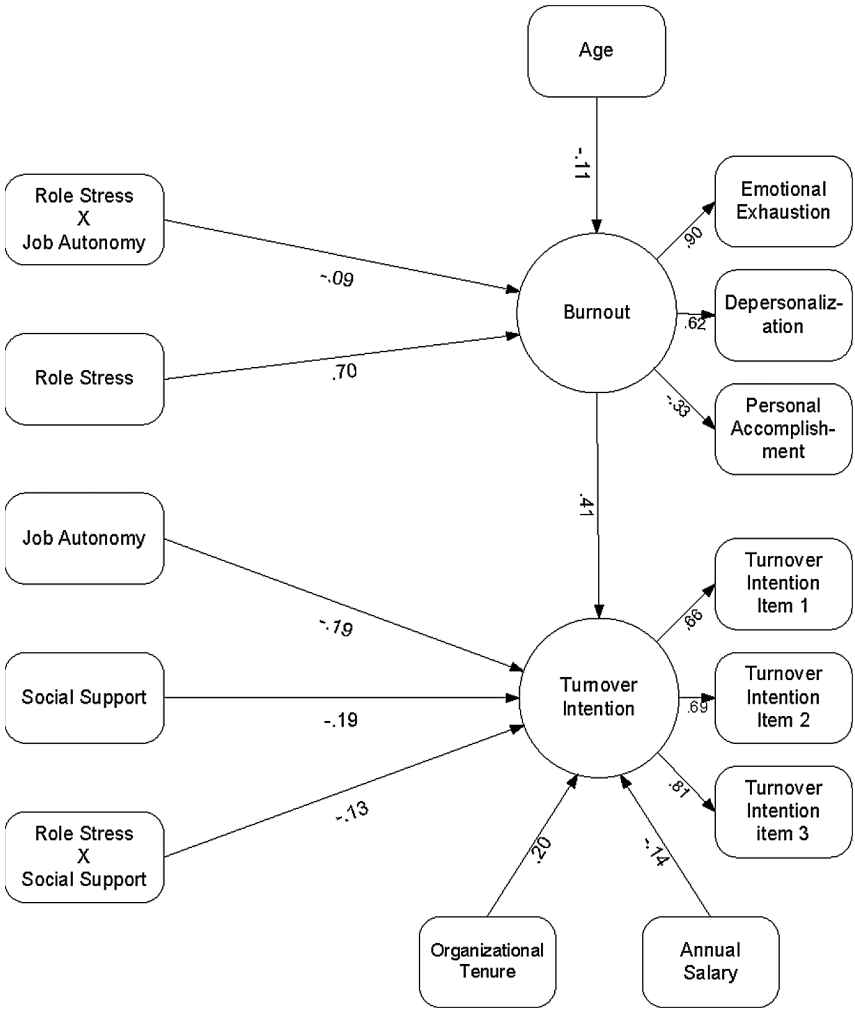
Note. RS: role stress; JA: job autonomy; SS: social support; RS x JA: interaction term between RS & JA; RS x SS: interaction term between RS & SS; EE: Emotional Exhaustion; DP: Depersonalization; PA: Personal Accomplishment; TI: turnover intention; Tenure: organizational tenure; Salary: annual salary.

*$p < .05$ (2-tailed).

correlation coefficients for 13 observed variables and two interaction terms in the structural equation models. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis, including two latent variables, supported the measurement model. The GFI was 0.97, and the CFI was 0.95. Because the measurement model was found to be a convergent and proper solution for the data, structural paths were specified among these latent constructs and the structural models were examined. The structural model yielded an overall χ^2 (75) value of 160.54, with χ^2/df = 2.14, GFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.92, and RESEA = 0.058. For the purpose of achieving a more parsimonious model, the proposed model was further modified by trimming non-significant paths based on the series of chi-square significant tests. If removing each non-significant path did not influence the model fit, the non-significant path was removed from the model. Removing the non-significant paths did not influence the model fit. As a result, the parsimonious final model (figure 2) yielded an overall χ^2 (80) value of 162.54, with χ^2/df = 2.03, GFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.93, and RESEA = 0.055. The squared multiple correlation for turnover intention indicated that once the effects of age, gender, organizational tenure, and annual salary were accounted for, the model explained 37 percent of the variance in turnover intention among social workers represented in this study.

Figure 2 reports all standardized path coefficients and presents the relationships among constructs in the model. Specifically, role stress has an indirect effect on turnover intention through burnout. Role stress was strongly associated with burnout (β = 0.70) (H1-a), but not directly with turnover intention (H1-b). Burnout was significantly associated with turnover intention among social workers (β = 0.41) (H6). This suggests that burnout mediates the relationship between role stress and turnover intention. Regarding the effects of social support and job autonomy, the results only partially support the hypothesis that social support and job autonomy are negatively associated with burnout and turnover intention. Social support (β = –0.19; H3-a) and job autonomy (β = – 0.19; H2-b) were negatively associated with turnover intention, while job autonomy and social support were not associated with burnout (H2-a, H3-b). Regarding the hypothesized moderating effects, the interaction term between job autonomy and role stress was negatively significant in explaining burnout, which suggests that the relationship between role stress and burnout is stronger when job autonomy is lower (H4-a). Furthermore, an interaction term between social support and role stress was negatively associated with turnover intention, which suggests that the relationship between role stress and turnover intention is stronger when social support is lower (H5-b).

FIGURE 2. Standardized Regression Weights for the Modified Structural Equation Model.



Regarding demographic variables in the model, age was significantly associated with worker burnout ($\beta = -0.11$). Consistent with the previous literature, older social workers were less likely to be burned out at work. In addition, organizational tenure ($\beta = 0.20$) and annual salary ($\beta = -0.14$) were associated with turnover intention, indicating that workers with

longer organizational tenure and lower annual salary have greater intention to quit. Regarding the relationship between organizational tenure and turnover intention, the results of the present study are different from previous studies (Somers, 1996), which suggest that workers with a shorter organizational tenure have higher levels of turnover intention. Furthermore, gender was not associated with levels of burnout.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the main and interacting effects of role stress, job autonomy, and social support on burnout and turnover intention among social workers. The study results on main effects are consistent with the theoretical framework of burnout (e.g., Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Demerouti et al., 2001). They show that burnout mediates the relationship between social workers' perceived role stress and the intention to quit their current jobs. Specifically, a social worker with higher role stress experiences relatively higher burnout, and higher burnout increases the likelihood of turnover intention. Job autonomy and social support did not have direct effects on burnout but did have direct negative effects on turnover intention. This suggests that lack of job autonomy and social support increases turnover intention among social workers, regardless of their perceived levels of burnout.

This study also examined interacting effects between role stress, job autonomy, and social support in predicting burnout and turnover intention. The results show that job autonomy moderates the relationship between role stress and burnout. In other words, social workers with higher role stress combined with lower job autonomy over demanding situations have higher levels of burnout. At the same time, social support interacts with role stress in explaining turnover intention among social workers. This finding suggests that although social workers perceive high levels of role stress, a supportive working environment helps them to maintain their attachment to the organization. Given the significant interacting effects, burnout and turnover intention should be viewed as an outcome of experiencing different job conditions.

Practical Implications

As a helping profession, social work imposes on workers particular stressors that are inherent in jobs that are based on worker-client interactions

In addition to client-related pressures, social workers are required to meet program-specific standards defined by agencies, which are often influenced by funding arrangements (such as managed care), and broader policy measures such as the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (Patti, 2000). When organizations become more responsive to the standards of accountability imposed by various funding and policy bodies, frontline workers tend to become confused and weary in their efforts to meet concomitant guidelines. As a result, workers are susceptible to experiencing higher levels of job stress. According to Arches (1991), a bureaucratic work environment deters social workers from holistically approaching their tasks since tasks and knowledge areas are narrowly defined, thereby eliminating the potential for social workers to gain control over the services they provide to clients.

Given the stressful situations experienced in most social work positions, the major implication of this research is that jobs should be redesigned so that levels of job autonomy and social support are increased in an effort to prevent burnout and retain workers (Dollard et al., 2000; Johnson & Hall, 1988). Increasing job autonomy and support for social workers can be practically difficult for human service managers. In soliciting direct input from frontline social workers, administrators might first examine social workers' opinions about their current, role-specific stressors such as workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity. Managers and supervisors also need to focus on developing organizational strategies for decentralized and supportive working environment. Managers and supervisors can help social workers to set priorities for day-to-day work, select approaches to doing work, and make decisions about their tasks. Supervisors need to facilitate information sharing up and down the hierarchy to help administrators understand how decentralized and supportive working conditions could be achieved at the organizational level. At the same time, supervisors need to monitor the work process closely and provide adequate guidelines for social workers in making decisions regarding clients.

Study Limitation

While this study provides a better understanding of burnout and turnover intention among social workers, it was methodologically limited by the cross-sectional design in assessing structural models, including mediating models (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). For future studies, researchers should employ a longitudinal design to inform causal relationships

between burnout and turnover intention. In addition, it is unclear how well these findings can be generalized to the greater social worker population. Although selected randomly, the sample was limited to registered social workers in California. According to the Current Population Survey (a U.S. Census Bureau-administered monthly survey of the U.S. labor market), nearly 30 percent of self-reported social workers have less than a Bachelor of Arts degree, while 10 percent have no college education (Barth, 2003). Thus, researchers need to reexamine the conceptual model using a sample of entry-level social workers without MSW degrees. Overall, results based on a more representative sample would increase understanding of the burnout phenomenon in social work. Additionally, higher return rates might be achieved by a smaller sample size and more sophisticated research designs with multiple follow-ups.

Administrators are often reluctant to participate in such research for fear it may reveal systematic problems in their organizations and/or create additional stress for frontline social workers. Such reluctance must be overcome because examining the effectiveness of organizational strategies requires not only sophisticated research designs and theoretically driven interventions, but also the support and cooperation of administrators and social workers directly affected by staff burnout and turnover.

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