

# Corrosion of trust: violation of psychological contracts as a reason for turnover amongst social workers

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## ABSTRACT

Staff shortage in the social sector is a serious problem in several countries and the high turnover rate of professional social workers presents a major challenge to the professional field. Social workers distinguish themselves as a particularly exposed occupational group, reporting higher workloads and more difficult demands in comparison with other human service workers. Inspired by psychological contract theory, the objective of this study was to describe social workers' turnover processes that lead to a decision to quit after a perceived violation of a psychological contract. Thirty-one interviews were conducted with former statutory social workers who had voluntarily resigned from their jobs during the preceding year. The analysis identified four themes in the turnover processes stemming from perceptions of organisational failure to fulfil promises concerning the provision of: (1) a balance between demands and resources at work, (2) a balance between efforts and rewards, (3) organisational professional ethics, and (4) responsible human resource practices. The results highlight how organisational responses to work-related dissatisfactions by social workers seem to enhance their conviction of psychological contract breaches and perceptions of contract violations, resulting in turnover. An important conclusion is that public sector employers need to reconsider their personnel strategies and practices in order to start rebuilding trust and creating a more positive work climate.

## KEYWORDS

Social workers; turnover; psychological contract violation; work conditions

## Introduction

Over the past three decades, public organisations have undergone important organisational policy changes resulting in increased work demands and reduced professional control, especially within the social work sector (Burström et al. 2012; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Statistics also indicate that there has been a high prevalence of work-related stress among employees in the public welfare sector (European Agency 2009). Social workers describe themselves as a particularly exposed occupational group, reporting higher workloads and more difficult demands than other human service workers (Tham and Meagher 2009). Staff shortage in the sector is a serious problem in several countries and the high turnover rate of professional social workers presents a major challenge to the field. High employee turnover rates have serious implications for the continuity, quality and stability of services provided to citizens who depend on social services and could also damage organisational performance in any context (Park and Shaw 2013). Furthermore, turnover can have negative effects on clients and remaining staff members who struggle to receive/give services when positions are vacated and then filled by inexperienced personnel (Powell and York 1992). High turnover rates can reinforce clients'

mistrust of the system and in turn deter workers from remaining in or even entering the field (Todd and Deery-Schmitt 1996).

Typical predictors of turnover, such as poor performance and absenteeism, are important in other fields but not in human services. This is an important distinction that has a strong connection to the nature of work in emotionally intense fields, where employees often feel a greater responsibility and commitment towards their clients and colleagues than they do towards their employer (Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levin 2001). Human services professional culture basically values autonomy, expertise, ethics, meaningful and challenging work, and dedication to service delivery (Hoyer and Forkby 2011). On the contrary, management of public organisations emphasise control, close supervision, work standardisation and productivity (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

Considering this conflict between organisational conditions (e.g. high workloads, management by objectives and results) and social workers own professional expectations, the employees seem to meet their work demands at the expense of their own health (Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014; Hoyer and Forkby 2011). In addition, unmet subjective expectations or perceptions of employers' broken promises seriously damage the relationship between the organisation and the individual. This conflict could be explained in terms of a breach or even violation of the psychological contract between the two parties (Conway and Briner 2006; Rousseau 1995). Such a violation can have negative effects not only on attitudes and behaviour, but also on employees' health and well-being (Guest, Isaksson, and de Witte 2010).

From a framework of psychological contract theory, this paper aims to both increase understanding of why social workers choose to quit and describe the process and its evolution. Voluntary exit is often the outcome of a negative interaction between employer and employee. Quitting a job could be seen as an indication of a breakdown of the relationship and the last step after a perceived violation. To our knowledge, no study has examined this process and the steps leading to exit with a focus on the relationship between employee and organisation before the final decision to quit.

### **Antecedents to turnover in organisational research**

The most common predictors in the general turnover literature are demographic factors such as age, education, job level, gender, and organisational tenure (Blankertz and Robinson 1997). Young, highly educated employees are more likely to quit compared to the opposite demographic group (Manlove and Guzell 1997). Further, employees who differ in ethnicity, sex or age compared to the majority of their co-workers are also more likely to quit than are their colleagues (Koeske and Kirk 1995). Regarding tenure with the organisation, there is evidence that turnover rates are significantly higher among employees with a shorter length of service than among those who have been employed longer (Somers 1996).

Concerning professional perceptions, individuals who experience a conflict between their professional values and those of the organisation are more likely to quit (Manlove and Guzell 1997). Regarding work conditions, several studies found that employees experiencing high levels of job-related stress are more likely to quit (Todd and Deery-Schmitt 1996). Stress-related work characteristics that have been associated with turnover include role overload and lack of clarity in job description (Blankertz and Robinson 1997; Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner 2000). Such factors can lead to burnout and low job satisfaction, which are major contributors to turnover (Manlove and Guzell 1997). Finally, work group cohesion, low autonomy, non-supportive leadership, and employees' perceptions of procedural and distributive injustice in organisational policies are also related to turnover (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner 2000).

In research on social worker turnover, the strongest single predictor of actual turnover is intention to leave, followed by employment alternatives, low job satisfaction, and burnout (Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levin 2001). Social workers who lack professional and organisational commitment and experience excessive burnout and stress with low social support are likely to contemplate leaving the organisation (Kim and Kao 2014). However, when it comes to actual turnover, social workers who actually left

their jobs contemplated quitting prior to doing it, were discontent with management practices and had alternative employment options (DePanfilis and Zlotnik 2008; Webb and Carpenter 2012). Thus, interpersonal relations within the organisation, as well as different work characteristics, seem to be important antecedents to turnover. In general, research on turnover and quitting has focused on why workers leave and to a much lesser extent described the process, the 'how-question'. Development in the area, however, has moved towards integration of these lines of research (see e.g. Maertz and Campion 2004). There is still a gap in the turnover literature, specifically regarding social workers, concerning how the turnover processes develops and how organisations, through different management practices, respond within that process. Building on this approach, the notion of psychological contracts between social workers and public organisations will now be introduced and used as a theoretical tool to explain the quitting process.

### **Psychological contract theory**

The theory of psychological contracts was developed during recent decades to describe and understand the employment relationship in times of change. A psychological contract is a mutual exchange of promises between the two parties, employer and employee, leading to a perception of entitlement and obligation (Conway and Briner 2006; Guest, Isaksson, and de Witte 2010; Rousseau 1995). The psychological nature of the contract means that it is subjective, consists of both formal and implied beliefs about each party's responsibilities, and is dynamic (i.e. susceptible to change and disappointment). This means that the content of psychological contracts varies between individuals depending on their age, power and position in the organisation, and specific job demands. An important distinction is made between psychological contracts and normative contracts, as the latter concerns general social norms and beliefs within the workplace, such as fair treatment, reciprocity, and trust in the other party (Rousseau 1995). Trust as a concept is defined as 'a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (Rousseau et al. 1998, 395). We share the widely held assumptions that trust is psychological and vital to organisational life. Furthermore, normative contracts vary across organisations and human service jobs guided by laws and regulations. They can be quite distinctive from those of other forms of service work, e.g. customer relations.

The promises made as part of the exchange involved in the employment relationship form a psychological contract for the relationship. When these promises are not kept (i.e. there is a contract breach) it can lead to negative attitudes and behaviour in the workplace. Perceptions of contract breach by employees are commonly reported (Conway and Briner 2006). The consequences of such a perception have been the focus of many empirical studies (see e.g. Conway and Briner 2006; Zhao et al. 2007). A range of negative consequences has been reported, e.g. negative attitudes, (reduced satisfaction and commitment), distrust and leaving the organisation. The bulk of research has been quantitative, reporting factors related to negative outcomes, but the process involved is not yet fully understood. A classical model by Morrison and Robinson (1997) suggests that the cognitive perception of a breach should be differentiated from the strong emotional reactions involved in a violation. Furthermore, the cognitive evaluation often precedes the emotional reactions (e.g. disappointment, frustration and mistrust). The distinction between breach and violation has been confirmed by several authors (e.g. Zhao et al. 2007). However, the question remains: what is the effect of breaches and violations on actual turnover? Effects on intention to quit have been clearly shown, but studies of actual turnover have been rare, with some exceptions (e.g. Clinton and Guest 2013).

### **Aim and scope**

Inspired by psychological contract theory and how violations of psychological contracts could lead to exit, the objective of this study is to describe the process leading to the decision to leave by social workers who quit during the preceding year. More specifically, the focus is on: the exchange relationship

between social workers and the organisation; how social workers perceive this interaction; the dissatisfactions they perceive and react to; the response from the organisation; and finally, the social workers' perceptions and reactions to this response. The aim is to investigate how the turnover process evolves and why, i.e. the reasons they report in retrospect. This analysis will hopefully determine some possible factors behind social workers' decisions to quit that will help improve their working conditions and lower the rate of resignation.

## Method

### *Sample and data collection*

For participant recruitment, two medium-sized Swedish municipal organisations that had reported high turnover rates within their statutory social services agreed to provide contact information for all statutory social workers who voluntarily resigned during the year of 2014, resulting in a total of 101 potential participants. Telephone pre-screening was used to determine eligibility and provide information about the research criteria, agreement to participate through verbal consent, and agreement to fill out a demographic questionnaire and describe their main reasons for leaving. Of the 101 eligible social workers, 70 were contacted (69.3% response rate) and agreed to participate, whereas 31 could not be contacted due to inaccurate contact information. Of these, 57 of the 70 (81.4%) reported that their reason for quitting was dissatisfaction with work conditions. The remaining 13 gave other (not work-related) reasons. The empirical material was based on semi-structured individual interviews with 31 of the 57 statutory social workers who had voluntarily resigned due to work-related dissatisfactions. After 25 interviews were completed, new categories, themes, and explanations stopped emerging; however, we interviewed six more social workers to ensure saturation (Marshall 1996). All of the participants were women, originally from six different work units. The participants mean age was 41.8 years (SD = 10.8), mean years of occupation experience was 10.2 (SD = 7.4), mean years in the organisation was 6.1 (SD = 5.0) and mean years in a work unit was 3.1 (SD = 1.4).

The interviews were conducted in spring 2015. Each interview averaged one hour and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview included questions about topics such as reasons for dissatisfaction with work, followed by the participants' perceptions and interpretations of the organisation's response and interaction in their turnover process that finally made them decide to leave. The specific questions were individually adjusted based on the respondents' narratives.

## Analysis

Interview content was initially grouped according to categories such as dissatisfactions with work, organisational responses, and the participants' perceptions and interpretations of the organisation's responses and interactions in their turnover process. The thematic vertical analysis was complemented with a narrative analysis of each individual interview. For each individual we wrote a contextual summary of types of dissatisfaction, organisational response, and the social workers' perceptions and emotional reactions to this response. After further groupings within each category, four distinct themes emerged where the organisation failed to keep promises given as part of the exchange involved in the employment relationship, leading to perceived breaches of psychological contracts and ultimately the decision to leave. Two of the identified themes concerned psychosocial work conditions and could be interpreted using established balance models in organisational psychology (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Siegrist 1996). They can be described as the organisations' failure to fulfil promises to: (1) provide a balance between demands and resources at work and (2) provide a balance between efforts and rewards. The other two categories were more related to the qualities of organisational agents' attitudes and behaviours and can be described as the organisation's failure to: (3) follow professional ethics and (4) ensure responsible human resource (HR) practices. Each theme can be seen as a representation of a turnover process and the interview analysis showed that the various organisational responses to the social workers' expressed work-related dissatisfactions enhanced their negative reactions, which

reinforced their convictions of psychological contract violation. In this study, the organisations' responses were communicated by their key agents, such as local-level managers, senior managers, or politicians, but also through characteristics of groups or organisations, such as culture. To increase validity, two (or occasionally three) persons, independent of each other and in dialogue, carried out all groupings and categorizations. This way of establishing validity is frequently recommended in qualitative research and is described by Kvale (2008) in terms of dialogical intersubjectivity. This refers to a reciprocal negotiation and interpretation of meaning during all study phases.

## Results

The result section is structured around four turnover processes derived from the identified categories, where the social workers' initial dissatisfaction, the organisations' responses and finally the social workers' reactions to those responses before exit are described. Most of the social workers reported experiencing multiple dissatisfactions and the following processes at the same time, which altogether influenced their decision to leave. The aim of the result section below is to present a contextual description of the identified turnover processes.

### ***Organisations' failure to provide a balance between demands and resources***

#### ***Dissatisfaction***

One major cause of dissatisfaction was a perceived discrepancy between the demands and resources at work. The social workers expressed that their job demands exceeded their resources at work, which limited their ability to deliver quality work. Heavy, inequitable caseloads often prevented tackling the complexities that lay behind the immediate need, resulting in gatekeeper acting, where social workers processed clients through systems rather than working with them directly and sufficiently.

It is obvious that the investigations did not turn out great. You failed to notice things and you knew that you could do more for this child, that there was a need for more investigation. Unfortunately, there was not enough time and there were always several investigations on hold that I had not even started looking into. That really hurt inside. (I.3)

Many of the interviewees said their interaction time with clients was severely limited because of the time-consuming demands of the rigorous documentation needed in order to maintain the rule of law and so forth. Others experienced great stress and anxiety because they were always behind with documentation. In order to cope with the imbalance between work demands and available resources and still deliver quality work, many social workers used compensatory strategies. For example, they chose to work overtime and skip lunches and breaks in an attempt to maintain quality and performance levels.

#### ***Organisational response***

The perceived organisational response to the social workers' dissatisfaction with the imbalance between demands and resources was mainly to impose guilt on the individual. This consisted of more or less explicit blaming of the individual who failed to prioritise their tasks or clients and worked inefficiently. By 'efficient work', the managers did not mean content and quality, but rather the rapid closing of cases. Further, the interviewees noted that the unmanageable workloads were an obvious inbuilt structural defect that was downplayed by the organisation, who referred to the nature of social work and the fact that social workers always complain of high workloads.

The supervisors called on us to plan our time more wisely, but to me, that statement implied that I was not good enough. I was not competent enough to cope with my work. To me, it was all about organisational faults that made the workload absurd, but they turned it into an issue of individual incapacity. (I.9)

Here the social worker's description of the organisational response could be interpreted as an organisational strategy to normalise the situation and downplay or trivialise the social worker's experiences. Blame was also imposed through offering individual stress management, instead of dealing with the work situation.

### **Reactions before exit**

A majority of the social workers reported having experienced stress-related symptoms such as exhaustion, sleeping difficulties, and depression, which in some cases necessitated sick leave. Some also expressed a loss of professional meaning because of downward adjustments to their professional ambition:

You had to make really hard decisions in pressuring situations, and it is obvious that things do not turn out great when decisions are not reached in a rational and well-considered manner. It goes without saying that when people are constantly stressed out and never have the time to reflect, this will be at the expense of the quality of work. (I.22)

Several of the interviewees also described difficulties in letting go of thoughts about work during leisure time, which consequently affected their private lives. When social workers lose their trust in the organisation's intentions to improve the work situation, and imagine a working life with unavoidable stress-related problems, and feel negative emotions and a constant frustration from not being able to provide work of sufficient quality, there is no other alternative but to exit the organisation.

### **Organisations' failure to provide a balance between effort and reward**

#### **Dissatisfaction**

Several of the social workers described dissatisfaction regarding an imbalance between effort and reward. This group experienced a lack of reciprocity between their extra ordinary efforts to deal with chaotic work situations due to turnover among colleagues and managers and the organisation's appreciation of their efforts. Work units with high turnover suffer from a shortage of staff as well as competence loss in appropriate routines, methods, and knowledge about clients and networks. This often produces an extremely high workload for the remaining staff. The social workers described feeling obligated to demonstrate extra-role behaviour such as creating new routines, assisting new employees and tolerating temporary obligations, as well as accepting responsibility for too many clients and continuously working overtime in order to handle work. Some of the interviewees said they received no acknowledgement or appreciation for this, despite that there sometimes even existed an explicit agreement between the social worker and the organisation that extra-role behaviour would result in a reward, as illustrated in the quote below:

My supervisor told me that my participating in the introduction of new employees was creditable and a qualification for higher pay, but in the end nothing happened. As it turned out, we had very different views of the magnitude of my efforts. (I.13)

Some of the social workers also emphasised that their loyalty towards the organisation over a longer period of time in itself should have resulted in rewards. The main rewards that were desired were appreciation and performance feedback. Some of the social workers also emphasised that the low pay and limited career opportunities did not match the effort expended.

#### **Organisational response**

Several of the interviewees noted that their organisation often took a silent approach, meaning that their efforts were simply ignored and not recognised by managers. Above all, they emphasised that the amount of affirmation and acknowledgement given by the organisational agents was disproportionate to their hard work. Furthermore, a few of the interviewees said that managers directly belittled their efforts and extra-role behaviours by indicating that such 'behaviour is normal and everyone works as hard as you'.

### **Reactions before exit**

After long periods of extra-role activity and extraordinary efforts, a lack of organisational response gave rise to negative emotions such as disappointment, anger and indignation, but also sadness and self-blame when realising that the invested effort would never be explicitly valued or appreciated in terms of higher pay or career opportunities:



I had worked so hard and really struggled but my supervisor told me that ‘Everyone here is just like you. I have heard that same story 15–16 times’ ... I did not hear a single word of appreciation during our conversation. I did all my work independently and my supervisor told me that I am just like anyone else. I thought to myself that: No, I am not just like anyone else! (I.19)

## **Organisations’ failure to follow professional ethics**

### **Dissatisfaction**

Organisational failure to follow professional ethics refers to the social workers’ perceptions of a lack of genuine intentions and goals concerning service quality. To clarify, the social workers’ professional ethics that were overlooked by the organisation could be summarised and defined accordingly with Banks (1995) as ‘values or principles underpinning social work including: respect for the individual person, promotion of user self-determination, promotion of social justice and working for the interests of others’ (Banks 1995, 92). Several of the interviewees described a tangible sense of increased bureaucracy where the organisational governance forced them to adopt a more mechanistic and technical approach to delivering social services, which found expression in increased documentation and more concern for budgets and efficiency in terms of quantity (e.g. the number of closed cases being given the highest priority). The social workers stated that their decisions and action plans were not primarily encouraged on the basis of professional assessment, because such procedures were regarded as time consuming and often economically unfeasible given the need for a balanced budget. Further, as illustrated in the quote below, several of the social workers were dissatisfied with organisational short-term thinking regarding what was considered important when investigating:

You were supposed to open and, above all, close investigations. The latter was the priority. Basically, we copied the content in previous investigations because no one seemed to care about the quality of the investigations. I believe that social work is about building relations with the clients as a long-term approach, but that part of the work was not prioritised because that type of effort was not immediately measurable. (I.6)

From the interviews, it was also evident that the social workers experienced a restricted scope of action in using their professional judgement about appropriate interventions, because such interventions were often too expensive from the organisation’s perspective. Some social workers stated that different organisational agents even went as far as to interfere with on-going investigations without the consent of the social workers. The motives for these types of interfering actions from organisational agents were perceived as strictly economical. The social workers described managers adjusting investigations and decisions to match the kind of decision the managers could accept from an economical, rather than professional, standpoint. Within a framework of accountability, which refers to ‘the development of increasingly detailed procedures for doing tasks and the setting of predefined targets or outcomes for professional work’ (Banks 2007, 12), this meant that these social workers sometimes had to explain and account for their practice even though they themselves had not fully assessed the appropriate actions for the clients. Furthermore, a few interviewees highlighted that their skill development stagnated, which was seen as necessary to continue to carry out their everyday work, but it also signalled that the organisation did not value professional development per se. One social worker described it as ‘like the organisation does not want to invest in our professional development, because they do not want us to come up with new ideas concerning our profession.’

### **Organisational response**

The perceived response to the social workers’ dissatisfaction with the organisations’ failure to follow professional ethics was mainly demands of obedience. In most cases, these demands were communicated directly to the social workers, both in collective contexts, such as work unit or team meetings, but also individually. The quote below exemplifies a typical perception of an organisational response when a social worker tried to voice her dissatisfaction over the difficulties working according to professional standards:

‘You should do what you are told to do!’ they said. Sure, you will do what you are told for a while but when you realise that you cannot stand up for the way you carry out your work professionally, you either get back in line and do what you are told, or you leave. I decided to leave, because I did not get my message through about how I wanted to conduct my work to the organisation. (I.20)

Many of the social workers also expressed that their attempts to protect their professionalism and service quality were indirectly silenced by their organisation’s focus on efficiency and internal productivity, achieved by management through objectives and results.

### **Reactions before exit**

The main reaction that the social workers described in this regard was a collapse of trust towards their organisation’s professional ethics and interest in service quality. The social workers experienced a substantial discrepancy between their own and their organisation’s ethical and professional values. The pressure to deal with two imposing and incompatible approaches to professional ethics (individual vs. organisation) ultimately resulted in role conflict:

When you try to build a professional relation with the clients, you often see that their quality of life improves. These experiences get you through the day. But this way of working was not encouraged by the organisation, which meant that the work became something of an uphill struggle. As a result, you had to defend your way of working. (I.18)

The interviewees’ descriptions of the organisations’ direct and indirect ways of positioning themselves concerning quality aspects in social work provided evidence that the organisations do not prioritise professional ethics and service quality. From the social workers’ point of view, their own professional ethics came into conflict with organisational actions and attitudes towards quality. As a reaction before exit, they described a work situation characterised by serious role conflicts that in the end resulted in a loss of professional meaning.

### **Organisations’ failure to establish responsible human resource practices**

#### **Dissatisfaction**

The last category is an overarching one connected to all previous categories, but expanding from the individual to the collective level. To clarify, social workers perceiving dissatisfactions refers to absent organisational reciprocity towards the *individual*, while the failure to establish responsible HR practices refers to the social workers’ perceptions of organisational concern for the *collective* group. A majority of the social workers described a lack of organisational concern and interest in creating sound, sustainable working conditions. When witnessing on-going organisational neglect of matters such as sick leave, personnel turnover and stress-related illnesses, most of the social workers felt frustration over the organisations’ deficient responsiveness towards the employee collective:

Colleagues came and left incessantly. Even the supervisors quit, which meant that workgroups were without supervisor guidance. We had to figure out our own ways to deal with the everyday work, but it was hard because neither of us had any decision-making mandate ... The common feeling amongst us was ‘Let’s collapse together’, due to the workload and the organisational mistrust towards us as a professional group. (I.10)

The interviewees described how they perceived the organisation as passive and irresponsible when problems in the work environment were obvious. Nothing was done to improve work conditions, even though there was turnover among managers and social workers, sick leave due to stress, and complaints about work conditions that prevented the social workers from doing their jobs properly. This kind of organisational neglect was also conveyed by not providing appropriate conditions for different tasks. One example concerned the introduction of new graduates, who were formally promised a smooth transition via adjusted caseloads, mentors, and support. In reality, they were faced with complex cases and high workloads right from the start. Also, their more experienced colleagues did not get adjusted caseloads to aid them in mentoring and supporting the new employees, but had to squeeze this extra work into an already overloaded schedule. Thus, the dissatisfactions concerned the



organisations' failure to provide working conditions that did not put the employees' health at stake, and also the failure to provide adequate prerequisites for the work required.

### **Organisational response**

The most significant organisational response was neglect, seen in a majority of the social workers' descriptions. Regarding immediate managers, there were several examples where they might have responded with concern and understanding toward difficult work conditions; however, often they lacked the mandate to make actual changes. In relation to the overall organisation, the social workers said that their attempts to increase awareness of how the organisation was treating the workforce were ignored and overlooked. They noticed that various organisational agents increasingly used withdrawal strategies in order to avoid confrontations. The organisations did initiate various crisis meetings with an agenda that the social workers perceived as either an attempt to explain away the organisation's passiveness or impose collective guilt on the workforce, instructing them to work more efficiently and prioritise in order to deal with the situation.

There was a crisis in the entire organisation and we tried to make our voice heard without any response. After numerous crisis meetings and no signs of change or improvement, it felt like an unsolvable situation. (I.14)

Another type of organisational response was to plan for/implement reorganisation. The communication from organisational agents regarding future reorganisation affected the work climate negatively and worsened the situation due to the uncertainty of how, where and with whom they might work. From the social workers' perspective, reorganisation made a chaotic situation even worse without addressing the real problem.

### **Reactions before exit**

The main reaction among the social workers was a collapse of trust regarding the organisations' HR practices. The numerous experiences of collective mistreatment lead to a collective awareness that the organisation did not have any intention to create a sustainable and healthy working environment where the employees actually could actually carry out their work and simultaneously experience job satisfaction. The social workers reported organisational attitudes and behaviours that devalued individual competence and qualifications, 'as if everyone is replaceable':

The organisation did not listen to its employees and did not care about their employees' well-being. You felt like you could not discuss things openly and it created a scattered sense of insecurity and hostility ... Our work was like an industry, a machinery. If I leave, I am just replaced by another worker. My unique qualities did not matter. (I.2)

A majority of the interviewees described experiencing negative emotions in response to situations and events that affected their fellow colleagues, even if they were not directly or personally involved in the situation. They also explained that they would have left the organisation earlier if not for their loyalty and concern towards their colleagues and clients.

## **Discussion**

The sample in this study consisted of social workers from two Swedish municipal organisations who had voluntarily left their jobs during the preceding year after a negative downward spiral where problem-solving efforts met with negative responses from the organisation. Discontentment concerning a previous employer might be more distinct and pronounced among individuals that have made the decision to leave. Nevertheless, high turnover rates in statutory social work represents a serious problem in Sweden and many other countries (Meagher, Cortis, and Healy 2009; Webb and Carpenter 2012) and it is therefore vital to investigate the experiences of social workers that have chosen to quit. This study's contribution is a qualitative, in-depth investigation of the relational process leading to voluntary exit from social service organisations.

From the results, it is evident that the different turnover processes show similarities. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the existence of different types of psychological contracts that have been perceived to

be violated in different ways, resulting in overlapping but still slightly different emotional reactions. As a starting point, different types of psychological contract *breaches* can be identified from the descriptions of the social workers' various dissatisfactions. A perceived contract breach, according to Morrison and Robinson (1997), serves as a trigger for a cognitive sense-making process that may or may not lead to a perception of violation. All of the psychological contracts in this context were relational and concerned issues such as respect, promises of future rewards for hard work and opportunities for professional growth (Rousseau 1995). The content of relational contracts was mainly implied, meaning that the social workers had perceptions of promises not expressed openly that often differed from those held by the organisation or organisational agents responsible for fulfilling those promises.

The first type of relational contract that can be derived from the descriptions is the perceived agreement that the organisation should balance demands with matching resources in order for the social workers to maintain service quality. From the results, it is evident that the lack of time as a resource caused an imbalance in relation to demands, leading to a perceived contract breach. In line with earlier research (Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014; Schwartz 2007), these findings indicate that high job demands and lack of resources play important roles in social workers' decisions to quit. The second relational contract identified can partly be derived from the perceived exchange agreement regarding a balance between efforts and rewards. It is clear that the social workers perceived a contract breach when not receiving appreciation from organisational agents in proportion to their efforts. Previous studies of human service professions have also concluded that when employees perceive an imbalance between efforts made and rewards received, it influences not only intentions to leave, but actual turnover and premature departure from their job (Derycke et al. 2012; Hasselhorn, Tackenberg, and Peter 2004). The third form of relational contract found concerns the perceived promise that the organisation would value professional ethics by providing genuine intentions and goals concerning quality and defending professional autonomy and standards. From the results, it is evident that the social workers perceived a psychological contract breach in this regard when being subjected to organisational control and de-professionalisation processes that hindered their achievement of long-term goals in a high-quality manner. In line with Banks (1998), it is further evident that the social workers code of ethics put the rights and interests of their clients first, before those of the organisation whose rules and codes of practice were perceived as reducing them to mere technicians. These results are consistent with earlier research (Astvik, Melin, and Allvin 2014; Mänttari-van der Kuip 2014) that argues that decreasing opportunities to do ethically responsible and qualitative social work due to organisational demands for efficiency and budget constraints influence social workers' decisions to leave.

Finally, the interviewees described a relational and implied *normative* contract, which is a shared psychological contract that emerges when members of an organisation or unit hold similar beliefs about the exchange agreement (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). In this context, this contract regards the perceived shared promise that the organisation would establish responsible HR practices towards the collective to which the social workers belonged. Even though each respondent primarily described this type of perceived psychological contract as an individual perception, it is evident from the results that through socializations processes and the social climate their perceptions converged with the perceptions of other members in the collective because the contract involved the perceived promise of organisational concern for the collective. Therefore, it is argued here that this type of psychological contract slightly differs from the mentioned relational implied contracts due to socialisation and social climate, which provide further signals about the exchange agreement (Rousseau 1995). The related concept of HR orientation within the organisation (i.e. where employees feel sufficiently rewarded for a job well done, valued, or taken care of) was, when perceived to be missing, found to be a key predictor of social workers' intention to quit (Tham 2007). Previous studies (Gibbs 2001; Huxley et al. 2005) also found that the extent that an organisation took care of their personnel and was interested in employee health and well-being was of major importance to social workers' decisions to stay or leave. Correspondingly, from the results of this study, it is evident that the way an organisation treats and values its employees can prevent psychological contract breaches and decrease social workers' intentions to leave.

As stated before, a perceived contract breach does not equal a violation per se. The interpretation process between contract breach and violation involves an evaluation of outcomes, attributions for why the contract breach occurred and judgements about how fairly one was treated (Morrison and Robinson 1997). In this interpretation process, the organisation has the ability to redress the psychological contract by actively managing the perceived breach. This aspect has been largely overlooked by research thus far, which means that little can be said about which management approaches work or do not work when dealing with perceived psychological contract breaches (see Conway and Briner [2006] for an overview). The few empirical studies that have investigated what mitigates employee reactions after contract breach before perceived violation highlight three main methods of redressing: offering explanations as to why the breach occurred; compensating for losses resulting from the breach by providing more of another inducement; and ensuring procedural justice (Kickul, Lester, and Finkl, 2002; Lambert, Edwards, and Cable 2003; Robinson and Wolfe Morrison 2000). From these studies, it is evident that the organisation can indeed redress a perceived psychological contract breach if the broken promises are matched with an appropriate type of justice or compensation of equivalent value to the removed contract inducement. On the other hand, one study indicated that offering only explanations is not sufficient or effective (Lambert, Edwards, and Cable 2003).

From the social workers' perspectives, it is evident that the organisations have failed to redress the perceived psychological contract breaches. The social workers' descriptions of various organisational responses clearly indicate that no organisational efforts really aspired to restore the psychological contracts. On the contrary, the organisational responses *enhanced* the social workers' convictions that the psychological contracts had been breached in their interpretation processes, leading to perceived contract violations. The most common organisational responses reported were neglect, demands of obedience, imposition of individual guilt and normalisation.

From the results, it is furthermore evident that the social workers' experiences of psychological contract violations including strong negative emotional reactions were severe due to the predominant relational employment relationship. The violations that can be derived from the social workers' reactions before exit include negative emotions such as anger, indignation, self-doubt, and sadness. Some of the social workers also reported stress-related symptoms such as exhaustion and sleeping problems resulting from these negative emotions. However, the strongest emotional reactions from the social workers' descriptions can be summarised and conceptualised as a corrosion of trust regarding the organisations' overall HR practices. It is evident that the experienced corrosion of trust amongst the social workers is a clear expression of a violation of the fundamental shared beliefs and assumptions that essentially governed the relationship between them and the organisation, consequently leading to turnover. The organisational shortcomings identified in this study are not isolated occurrences that are only salient in the social service sector. While it was not the focus of this study, it still seems reasonable to assume that these shortcomings are related to management systems in the public sector. Thus, the negative effects of irresponsible HR-practices could cause high turnover in other occupations in the Swedish welfare sector (e.g. nurses, teachers, and policemen).

## Conclusion

Our results contribute to a deeper understanding of the different kinds of perceived organisational shortcomings that are connected to voluntary turnover among social workers. We highlight four general dissatisfactions: an imbalance between demands and resources; an imbalance between effort and reward; conflicting goals related to social workers' professional ethics and standards versus organisational preoccupations with budget and efficiency; and finally, a lack of responsible HR practices. The negative emotions and gradual corrosion of trust leading to exit are individual reactions, but they could affect the social climate and lead to collective turnover, a phenomenon that may result in more detrimental consequences for organisations because of the greater depletion of human capital (Nyberg and Ployhart 2013). The most important conclusion is that public sector employers need to reconsider their personnel strategies and practices in order to start rebuilding trust and creating a

more considerate climate. A first step could be to actively engaging with the issue and taking back full responsibility in creating a sustainable, healthy working environment instead of blaming and delegating responsibility to individual social workers.

## Disclosure statement

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