

University of Groningen

Loyalty in humanity

Visser, Miranda

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Visser, M. (2015). *Loyalty in humanity: turnover among expatriate humanitarian aid workers*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. [S.n.].

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROFESSIONALIZATION AND TURNOVER OF EXPATRIATES IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

Humanitarian aid is provided in contexts where something has gone terribly wrong. The general task is to save lives, alleviate suffering and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). The number of operational agencies undertaking these tasks has grown tremendously over the past decades. The provision of humanitarian aid has developed into a multi-billion industry with the latest reports indicating that the level of international humanitarian response rose to a staggering record of 22 billion dollars in 2013. The number of humanitarian workers worldwide now exceeds 300,000 (ALNAP/Overseas Development Institute, 2012; Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2013).

This dissertation is about attempts of a major humanitarian organization to increase the professionalization of its most precious asset: aid workers. In several important respects, their daily work differs considerably from most other jobs. Witnessing human suffering is a daily reality for them. They usually work under time pressure and must deal with a constant lack of resources (time, money, labor), because the demand for humanitarian aid often exceeds the supply of humanitarian aid (Heyse, 2010). They operate in environments where hardly anyone would voluntarily go, often remote locations far away from home. Humanitarian aid workers are increasingly exposed to substantial levels of uncertainty and danger. In 2013, 155 aid workers were killed, 171 wounded and 134 kidnapped – a rise of 66 percent compared to 2012. In the first half of 2014, attacks on aid workers worldwide hit the worst levels on record (Thomas Reuters Foundation, August 19, 2014), with 79 humanitarian employees already killed.

Besides job-related pressures, aid workers are confronted with increasing public criticism and demands for accountability and transparency of the agencies they work for. These organizations have been widely criticized for being inefficient, underperforming, and wasting money in various humanitarian crises (e.g. Polman, 2008; Salamon & Anheier, 1997; Terry, 2002). The humanitarian sector was called to introduce minimum standards in aid provision, and improve coordination (Heyse et al, forthcoming). Among other efforts, this led to several initiatives toward standardization and professionalization of work in the sector, such as the Sphere project, People in Aid, and the founding of ALNAP and ELHRA.¹

One particularly important professionalization initiative is geared to creating a better-prepared humanitarian aid workforce. Professionalization of human resource

¹ The Sphere project aims to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance and accountability of humanitarian actors by setting common standards in humanitarian response. People in Aid aims to improve organizational effectiveness in the humanitarian and development sector by advocating, supporting and recognizing good practices in people management. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) is a system-wide network dedicated to improving humanitarian performance through increased learning and accountability. ELHRA stands for Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance. It aims to create a global humanitarian community where humanitarian actors collaborate with higher education institutes to develop highly professional responders, share expertise and carry out research that reduces risk and ensures timely, relevant and sustainable assistance to those suffering the impact of disasters.

management (HRM) practices is among the key instruments humanitarian aid organizations use to improve the skills and commitment of their employees. HRM practices can be defined as a system that attracts, develops, motivates, and retains employees to ensure the effective implementation and survival of the organization and its members (Schuler & Jackson, 1987). Ideally, it consists of a set of internally consistent policies and practices designed and implemented to ensure that an organization's human capital contributes to the achievement of its business objectives. The most commonly known practices are participation and empowerment, incentive pay, employment security, promotion from within, and training and skill development (Delery & Doty, 1996). A major insight of HRM scholarship is that these practices will develop their performance-enhancing effects only if they are aligned with the specific organizational, sectoral, and cultural context in which they are applied (Paauwe, 2004). Up until now, the humanitarian sector has received relatively little attention from HRM scholars, a gap that this dissertation aims to tackle.

Humanitarian organizations began professionalizing their workforces by offering employees formal career paths, rules for promotion, and opportunities for (management) training and development (Barnett, 2005; Heyse, 2010). In addition, human resource management staff with formal training and experience in HRM management was more frequently appointed. External initiatives like People in Aid and ELRHA were initiated to promote and assist aid organizations in investing in the professionalization of their workforce (see ELRHA, 2010).

The objective of improving personnel and HRM practices in the humanitarian sector is to contribute to the professionalization of the relationship between employees and the organization. Many humanitarian aid organizations have expressed concerns about precisely this relationship, especially in relation to staff turnover. This is a particularly pressing issue in the field of humanitarian work, where the retention of a qualified workforce is considered a problem due to traditionally high turnover rates (Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Telford & Cosgrave, 2007), especially among expatriate staff. Expatriate staff are employees who work in another country than their country of origin. High staff turnover has serious implications because experienced and qualified employees are extremely valuable assets. Scholars and practitioners alike consider high turnover problematic because it leads to high organizational costs for recruiting, selecting, and training new employees (Moynihan & Pandey, 2008; Wright & Bonett, 2007). High turnover also hampers organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and workflow, due to loss of institutional memory (Griffeth & Hom, 1995; Loquercio et al., 2006; Price, 2001; Shaw, Gupta, & Delery, 2005). Although turnover also has beneficial effects for organizations (Dalton, Todor, & Krackhardt, 1982), e.g. in terms of bringing in new ideas, there seems to be consensus that its costs by far outweigh its benefits, given the high levels it has reached in the humanitarian sector (Loquercio et al., 2006).

In the humanitarian sector, it was long assumed that high turnover would be unavoidable due to the uncertain and often dangerous contexts in which aid work is carried out: stress, exhaustion, and trauma would prevent aid workers from pursuing long-lasting careers (Hearns & Deeny, 2007; Walkup, 1997). Nevertheless, the view is now widely shared that the sector can significantly reduce turnover, through professionalized personnel practices and policies (Loquercio et al., 2006; Walker & Russ, 2010).

To achieve this, the sector leans on insights gained from HRM practices in the for-profit sector (Lewis, 2003). A substantial part of these practices is meant to establish favorable job attitudes, which would enhance performance and reduce turnover (Pauwe, 2004:75). The introduction of these methods rests on the assumption that practices widely used in the for-profit sector – such as training, participation in decision-making, and performance appraisals – might generate the same favorable effects in the humanitarian sector. However, many scholars and practitioners doubt whether this assumption is justified, given the assumed large differences between for-profit organizations and non-profit humanitarian organizations (Eikenberry, 2009; Hopgood, 2008). There are several reasons why this is questioned. First, doubts have been raised whether these practices are effective for employees who are already highly committed, due to the non-profit character and ideological goals of the humanitarian organizations they work for (Almond & Kendall, 2000). Their work motivation might be more altruistic and less motivated by career ambitions, also because the pay in the non-profit sector is often relatively low. Second, the working context might be so different that similar personnel-related interventions generate different, perhaps even unintended effects. For example, humanitarian organizations that send teams of aid workers out in the field often cannot provide permanent contracts (job security) due to the unpredictable nature of humanitarian crises.

So far systematic academic insight concerning the effects of organizational attempts to influence outcomes like turnover intentions in the humanitarian sector are lacking. Little is known about if and how investments in employees in humanitarian organizations yield the intended benefits, like reduced turnover. Therefore the key question this dissertation examines is *to what extent can humanitarian organizations influence turnover, and if so, with what means and under which circumstances?*

1.2 EXPLAINING TURNOVER IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

Over the last 40 years, a large body of research has been devoted to developing models to predict voluntary turnover (See for excellent extensive reviews Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Mobley, 1977; Porter & Steers, 1973; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Voluntary turnover is when the decision to leave is made by the employee, not the organization (e.g. by firing an employee). Since this type of turnover is most problematic for organizations, especially humanitarian organizations, voluntary turnover is the focus of this dissertation. In principle, turnover is predicted by work-related attitudes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions). These attitudes, in turn, are affected by factors from multiple sources: the organization, the social context, the individual, and the external labor market. These four factors represent three levels: the individual (personal factors), the organization (formal, HRM; informal, social embeddedness), and the external environment (labor market).

This general conceptual framework guides our attempts to investigate what degree and how formal means available to the organizations affect staff turnover in humanitarian organizations. Our focus is on the individual and organizational level, since the external environment is beyond the influence of the organization. First, we focus on three dominant turnover-related attitudes (individual). Second, we relate these attitudes to a set of job and organization factors relevant to the humanitarian

sector. Third, we add the informal social context of aid work, given recent debates on the need for a 'social' approach to turnover, which is especially relevant for turnover issues in the humanitarian sector. Here we focus on the interplay between the formal means the organization has available to reduce turnover (particularly job design and HRM practices), and how these interplay with the informal context (particularly the social embeddedness of employees). In the next section, we elaborate on turnover-related attitudes, the formal means, and informal context. Figure 1.1 (see section 1.6) provides a visual summary of the research elements of this dissertation.

1.3 TURNOVER-RELATED ATTITUDES

As amply documented by previous research, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (thinking of quitting) are the three foremost attitudinal predictors of the actual decision to leave one's job (Mobley, 1977; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Price & Mueller, 1981). These three attitudes are central to the present study.

Job satisfaction and organizational commitment precede turnover cognitions and intentions. Job satisfaction is defined as 'an affective attachment to the job, or as an emotional state resulting from the evaluation or appraisal of one's job experiences' (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). One can think of individual components like job satisfaction, the amount of work, and the resources available for doing the job. Organizational commitment refers to the relation between the employee and the organization, defined as 'the strength of an individual's identification and involvement with a particular organization' (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974, p. 606).

Though both job satisfaction and organizational commitment are important predictors of turnover, there is some debate about their relative importance. Early research tended to focus on job satisfaction as the most important (Porter & Steers, 1973). Later on, organizational commitment was recognized as an additional important attitudinal predictor of turnover (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Whereas some scholars argue that these two concepts influence each other (although the causal direction differs throughout the literature), others see them as distinct constructs that should be treated as such. Since it is not our goal to ascertain the relation between these concepts, but to assess how the organization can influence attitudes pertaining to employee turnover, this dissertation treats job satisfaction and organizational commitment as separate constructs. Together with turnover intentions, these will be the three main outcome variables that will be examined in this dissertation.

However, just knowing that an employee is dissatisfied, does not feel committed to the organization, or has frequent thoughts about leaving does not help us to understand why this employee holds these attitudes, nor does it help us determine what must change to retain this person. To answer these critical questions, we must examine the various factors of the work situation that an organization can influence as they potentially relate to the attitudes conducive to reduced turnover. Most research on this topic has taken place in for-profit organizations. So, how do formal organizational characteristics like job design and HRM policies, and informal structures interact with and affect turnover in a humanitarian setting?

1.4 THE FORMAL ORGANIZATION: JOB DESIGN AND HRM

Due to their non-profit orientation and dependence on donations or public subsidies, humanitarian organizations are far more restricted in their choice of investments in employees than for-profit organizations (Schäfer, 2004). These organizations are expected to spend their money primarily on provision of aid rather than on 'overhead'. Therefore, monetary rewards, such as bonuses, pay-for-performance schemes, and high pay raises are likely to be considered 'not done' or inappropriate. Working in the context of humanitarian aid limits the options available in other contexts, like reducing work hours, schedule flexibility, and changing the working location.

These practices are labeled differently through the literature. Classic psychological turnover models label them 'organization-wide factors' and 'job-related factors' (Porter & Steers, 1973), whereas organizational and management scholars refer to them as human resource management practices (e.g. Gould-Williams, 2003; Guest, 2002; Huselid, 1995). Both emphasize the formal means through which organizations can influence turnover-related attitudes.

We focus on two dimensions of how the organization can formally affect turnover-related attitudes: through the definition and design of jobs, and the implementation of participatory and supportive HRM practices.

1.4.1 Job Design

We focus on three job design factors that are conducive to increasing control and understanding of one's job (Guerrero & Barraud-Didier, 2004) and enhance organizational involvement, such as improved self-management, personal development and problem solving capacities (see Boxall & Macky, 2009).

First, *job autonomy* denotes the amount of freedom an employee has with regard to the execution of tasks and decision-making in the field. Due to the urgent nature of humanitarian work, humanitarian employees often have to make rapid decisions that can have far-reaching consequences (Walkup, 1997). They often work at a distance from headquarters, which limits the possibility of quick consultations on matters in the field. These employees need substantial amounts of autonomy to handle complex and unpredictable tasks.

Second, *role clarity* (or low role ambiguity) refers to the employee's perception that their tasks are clearly specified. This is particularly important in crisis situations, where conditions change rapidly and interdependence among employees is high. Operating effectively in such conditions requires quick, often tacit coordination between employees and a clear division of labor.

Third, *work-life balance satisfaction* refers to the satisfaction with the perceived balance between work and non-work aspects of the job. Standard instruments to facilitate this balance, like reduced working hours and flexibility to change the working location (e.g. from home), are usually not available under the restrictions of humanitarian settings. These restrictions are often exacerbated by a compromised communication and physical infrastructure, and safety constraints. Consequently, on missions there seems to be little room for a 'life' aspect next to the job.

1.4.2 HRM Practices

We examine two types of HRM practices that humanitarian organizations can 'legitimately' use to increase organizational involvement (Boxall & Macky, 2009; Lawler III, 1986). First, *participatory practices*, which involve open communication and information sharing with employees, and participatory decision-making structures involving employees. Second, *supportive practices*, which involve procedural fairness of the performance appraisal process and investments in employability and skills by providing job training.

1.5 THE INFORMAL ORGANIZATION: SOCIAL RELATIONS AND TURNOVER

Classic turnover models (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Mobley, 1977; Porter & Steers, 1973) have argued that the informal relational context of one's job affects the turnover behavior of employees. We focus on a key element of the informal organization: the quality of the vertical and horizontal relationships, namely trust in management and high quality personal relations among co-workers.

Although classic turnover models point to the importance of the 'social dimension', systematic empirical evidence of its relation to turnover is scant, and many scholars emphasize that current turnover research still neglects interpersonal relations (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz & Griffeth, 2004; Mossholder, Settoon, & Henagan, 2005; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995). Some even criticize the field for using an 'under-socialized approach' to the turnover process. Following these claims, the relational perspective on turnover began receiving more attention (Mossholder et al., 2005), and a growing body of studies has empirically verified the importance of social relations for turnover intentions (e.g. Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz & Griffeth, 2004; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001; Mossholder et al., 2005; Moynihan & Pandey, 2008; Regts & Molleman, 2013).

This dissertation builds on this recent interest and examines how the social context influences the turnover process of employees. Both vertical relations (employee-management) and horizontal relations (employee-employee) are taken into consideration. For vertical relations we examine trust in management, defined as positive expectations of management, emphasizing faith in the good intentions of managers, confidence in the actions and competence of managers, and confidence that managers will act in a fair, reliable, and ethical manner (Cook & Wall, 1980). The horizontal relations are defined as the perceived quality of the relations between colleagues.

The importance of social context for reducing turnover intentions can be explained by two mechanisms. First, individuals engage in interpersonal relations for *instrumental purposes*. A high quality relationship with colleagues and trust in management offers employees the opportunity to gain access to information or advice, which in turn may help them to accomplish tasks better. Both factors can also be instrumental in learning about potential career opportunities (Raabe & Behr, 2003). Good social relations facilitate goal achievement and improve individual and collective task performance, which may lead to improved job attitudes and reduced turnover intentions.

Second, good social relations with co-workers and trusting management satisfies basic human *psychological needs*. The humanitarian setting is often

unpredictable and sometimes dangerous. In this context, good social relations foster the sense of support received by colleagues and management. For example, colleagues can provide (emotional) support and positive feedback about one's job competence (Fernet, Gagné, & Austin, 2010). And when making decisions can have far-reaching, sometimes life-or-death consequences, the need to feel supported by management is very important. Demands can seldom be met entirely, which can lead to a sense of constant failure and inability to deal with all these demands under severe time pressure. Employees might fear the consequences of failing to cope with the staggering number of demands, or of making the wrong decisions. Therefore trust in management and good social relations with co-workers are crucial. Feeling supported might reduce the fear of failure and increase the sense of being in control over one's situation (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002). Again, this may result in attitudes that are more favorable to the job and the organization and reduced turnover intentions. In sum, social context is likely to be of vital importance for individual turnover decisions, particularly in the humanitarian sector.

1.6 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The four chapters in this dissertation tackle the following overarching problem:

How can variations in individual turnover-related attitudes of expatriate humanitarian aid workers be explained by variations in organization and job-related practices, and how does the informal social context affect this relationship?

Each chapter studies the impact of a set of job design or HRM-related factors on work-related attitudes deemed important antecedents of turnover. The key contribution of each chapter consists of contextualizing these effects by investigating the role of the informal social setting, either in terms of trust in management (Chapters 2, 4 and 5) or horizontal social relations (Chapter 3). For a visual summary of key elements of the four studies, see Figure 1.1.²

The second chapter focuses on two features of humanitarian work: the large degree of *job autonomy* in combination with the assumed lack of a *work-life balance*. We examine to what extent job autonomy improves perceived work-life balance, as findings from the private sector suggest. We argue that this link is less straightforward in humanitarian settings, and suggest that trust in management is a vital precondition for autonomy to improve perceived work-life balance.

Chapter 3 investigates the link between perceived *role clarity* and turnover intentions. Since humanitarian missions often require rapid decision-making and smooth lateral coordination among aid workers, we argue that perceived role clarity would reduce turnover intentions only if informal relations are good.

Chapter 4 focuses on *job training* as an HRM tool to influence organizational commitment. Using a gift-exchange perspective, we assume that employees attach higher value to training that improves their employability in *other* organizations, within or outside the humanitarian sector. This results in higher levels of commitment

² As these studies were originally written as independent articles for publication in various journals, some overlap is inevitable, especially when it comes to the methodological approach and introduction of the problem of turnover in the humanitarian sector.

for general training as compared to firm-specific training. Since management decides on the allocation of training opportunities, we argue that in this group, sector-specific training, and general training results in higher commitment only when trust in management is high, whereas firm-specific training is perceived as a negative and leads to lower levels of commitment.

Finally, Chapter 5 argues that high-involvement HRM practices lead to lower turnover because they trigger a positive chain reaction: increased trust in management, results in greater job satisfaction, and subsequently a stronger intention to stay.

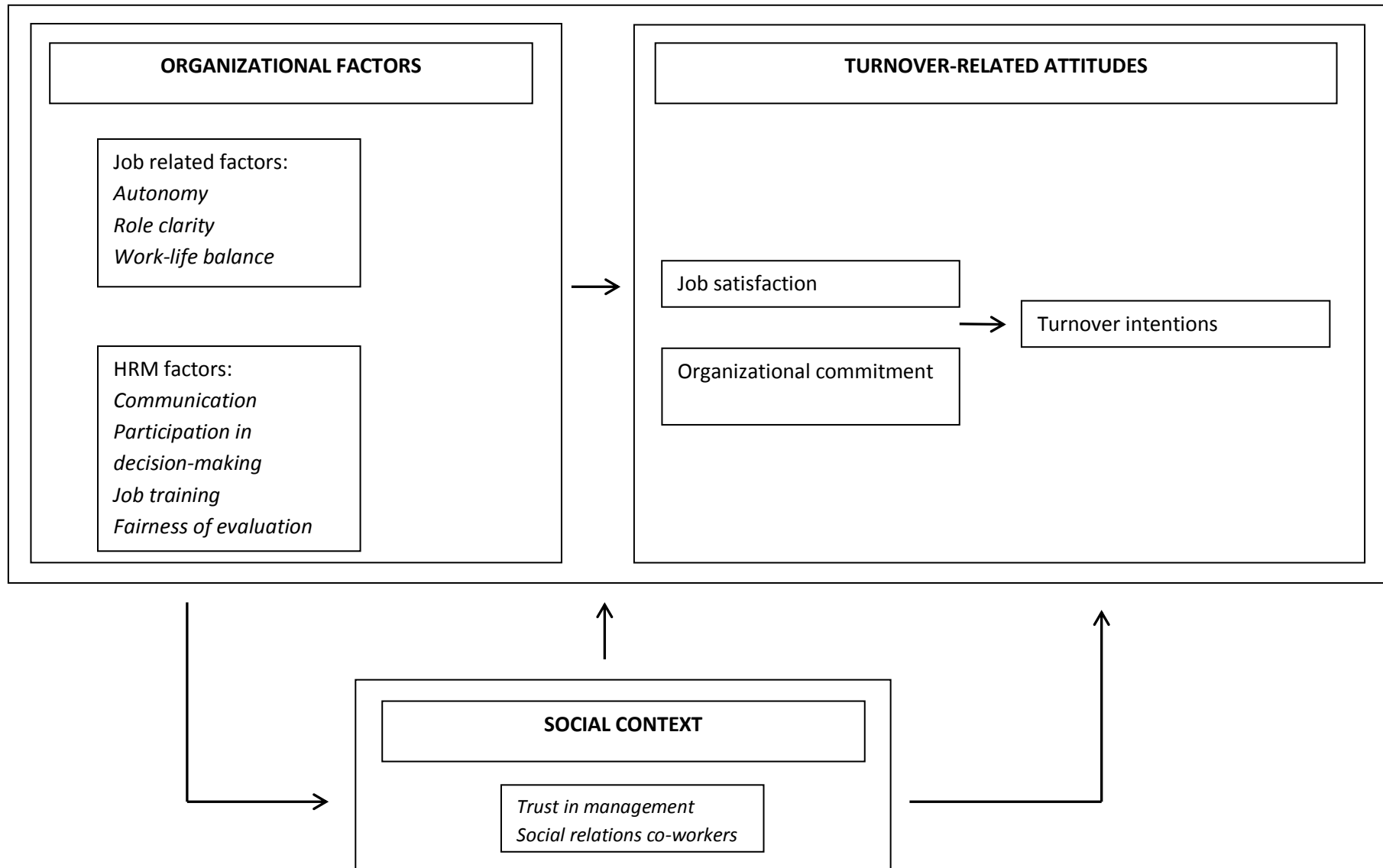


Figure 1.1. Visual summary of research elements in dissertation

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

Despite the societal importance of humanitarian aid, these organizations have received limited academic attention, mainly because quantitative data in this field is scarce and gaining access to this hard-to-reach population is challenging, to say the least (Fechter, 2012; Teegen, Doh, & Vachani, 2004). This dissertation is among the first to give an in-depth quantitative account of the dynamics of turnover in the humanitarian sector.

Data was collected from the operational center of one of the largest humanitarian aid organizations in the field, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF).³ The study took place in the context of an ongoing long-term project on the professionalization efforts of this organization (Heyse, 2006; Korff, 2012). We were given permission to approach MSF's expatriate workforce, to access HRM policy documents and other background information, to talk to HRM and operational staff, and repeatedly discuss the research instrument and research findings.

Since MSF is considered a unique actor in the aid sector, we must be careful with generalizing our findings to the full humanitarian community. We will return to this issue in the conclusion of this dissertation. In the following, we provide background information on MSF, and discuss the research design and execution of data collection in one of the hardest populations to reach – expatriate humanitarian aid workers in the field.

1.7.1 Organization: Médecins Sans Frontières

Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), is one of the largest and best-known organizations in humanitarian aid. It has earned its reputation from hundreds of missions providing care to millions of people. Started by a group of French doctors and journalists in France in 1971, MSF has spread throughout the world, fascinating both members of the medical field and the public alike. It is famous for traveling to places where other aid agencies cannot or will not go to provide aid to those who need it most. In 1999, MSF were rewarded for their efforts with the Nobel Peace Prize (Redfield, 2013).

Today MSF is an international alliance of 19 organizations in various countries. The MSF country organizations work together in operational centers that are responsible for MSF's aid projects. MSF Holland was founded in 1984 by a group of six volunteers who set up office in an Amsterdam cellar (De Milliano, 1991). MSF Holland forms a partnership with MSF Germany and MSF UK in the MSF Operational Center in Amsterdam (MSF-OCA), and as such is an international hub in the MSF structure. MSF-OCA is involved in projects in 24 countries, and in 2014 had a budget of 42.5 million euro (Annual report MSF, 2014).

In the mid-1990s, MSF began responding to rising calls for professionalization, which prompted among other responses the development of a specialized human resource policy, geared toward retaining qualified employees and offering career paths in the organization (Heyse, 2006; Korff, 2012).

³ For more information on the history and background of MSF: www.doctorswithoutborders.org.

1.7.2 The Humanitarian Employment Survey (HES)

After conducting an extensive review of factors related to turnover in the literature of the past 40 years, a first draft of a research instrument was developed in 2010. Based on the aforementioned turnover models, we developed a survey using as many pre-tested items as possible – the *Humanitarian Employment Survey* (HES). We discussed the HES extensively with HRM and operational staff at MSF-OCA. Many had field experience and could provide valuable information about the fit of these items to the humanitarian work context. Since the main interest is attitudes, we took a perceptual approach in our survey to gain insight into the perceptions employees have on the factors available to the organization. Attitudes are not necessarily influenced by objective measures of factors that potentially affect turnover attitudes, but by the perceptions of individuals of these factors. Perceptions then shape their attitudes since these have been shown to be more salient in their impact on individuals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

1.7.2.1 Distribution of survey

Before distributing the survey, we took several steps to ensure an optimal response rate among this hard-to-reach population. Most MSF employees work in the most remote parts of the world that are difficult to reach by standard means of communication. Unreliable internet connections exacerbate this problem. We discussed these steps with many actors in the organization. First, it was decided that the director and operational director should inform the key players about the upcoming survey. The research team drafted the letters in close cooperation with several employees from different layers of the organization, These were sent first to country managers and project coordinators before the all other respondents.

Second, we had several meetings with people from the technical department about the possibilities and limitations of an online survey in the humanitarian setting. Here it was decided to provide two options for HES. The first was a regular online format, for use by those whose internet connection was stable enough for the 45-odd minutes it would take to fill out the survey. The second was a very light (considering the bandwidth in certain locations) attachment that respondents could download quickly, fill out offline, and email back to the research team once an internet connection was available. Both options had identical content that differed only in the layout.

1.7.2.2 Response and sample

In 2011, the HES was sent to 550 expatriate fieldworkers, representing the full population of expatriate employees of MSF-OCA at that time. Two reminders were sent in the following eight weeks. We received completed surveys from 168 expatriate field workers, resulting in a response rate of 31%. Of these 168 respondents, 54 (32%) used the offline option, indicating that the response rate would have been substantially lower if we had only provided the online survey option. This response rate is consistent with the average response rate in expatriate samples obtained in other studies (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Black & Stephens, 1989; Naumann, 1993; Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001).

To assess the representativeness of our data, we analyzed the demographic characteristics of the sample in comparison to the full population in terms of gender,

occupational groups, and nationality. The HRM department provided this information. The country managers and project coordinators were slightly overrepresented, the sample was largely representative for occupational groups, gender, and nationality (see Appendix for details of the non-response analysis).

Humanitarian expatriates from 35 countries participated in this study. The gender distribution of our sample was equally divided, with 50.3% women, and 49.7% men. The average age was 38.5 years. Time working in the field (without leave and rest periods between missions) ranged from 1 month to 19 years, with an average tenure of a little over four years. The average respondent had been on four missions (range 1–21), and worked an average of 57.7 hours a week (measured as actual working hours, not hours according to contract). More than 85% of the sample had at least a Bachelor's degree. In terms of family demographics, 80% of the sample had no children in their household; almost 40% were single, and 27% married.

1.8 CONTRIBUTIONS

This study contributes to the topic of turnover in the humanitarian aid sector in several ways. First, humanitarian organizations are among the most criticized and at the same time most understudied types of organizations. This study is among the first to present systematic quantitative evidence on this hard-to-reach population. Substantial effort has gone into designing an instrument that could be used to access humanitarian aid workers working in the most remote parts of the world. These efforts resulted in a representative sample of one of the largest humanitarian aid organizations in the field, the MSF-OCA.

Second, using turnover literature on the for-profit sector as a point of departure allows us to address the general question of how far theories (e.g. gift exchange, signaling, and enabling resources theory) and job design practices were developed in the for-profit sector can be applied to this non-profit setting.

Third, our study highlights the importance of social embeddedness as a crucial factor in the turnover process. Although emphasized by classic turnover models in the 1970s, the informal organization, particularly interpersonal relations and trust, has only recently received systematic attention in the literature (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz & Griffeth, 2004; Mossholder et al., 2005; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995).

Finally, with its explicit focus on practices and organizational interventions, our study may be useful to HRM officers attempting to retain their high quality employees, thereby possibly contributing to the professionalization of the humanitarian sector.

