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### Loyalty in humanity

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# 3

## **REDUCING TURNOVER INTENTIONS IN COMPLEX TASK ENVIRONMENTS: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ROLE CLARITY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS AMONG HUMANITARIAN AID WORKERS<sup>5</sup>**

### **Abstract**

A large body of research demonstrates the harmful consequences of turnover for both individuals and organizations. Considering the context of humanitarian aid work, characterized by retention problems and complex task requirements, we aim to empirically examine two factors possibly conducive to reducing turnover intentions; role clarity and the quality of social relations among co-workers. We examine the interplay between these two factors, arguing that in highly complex task environments, role clarity can only reduce turnover if social relations between co-workers are of high quality. Using survey data collected from expatriate workers in one of the largest humanitarian organizations in the world, *Médecins sans Frontières* (N=146), we engage in regression analyses with results revealing that while social relations have a positive effect on turnover intentions, role clarity has no direct effect on turnover intentions. Role clarity only reduces turnover intentions if social relations with coworkers are of high quality. Our study contributes to the turnover literature by providing support for a ‘socialized’ approach to turnover research, thereby showing its relevance for the understudied category of non-profit humanitarian organizations.

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter was co-authored with Liesbet Heyse, Rafael Wittek and Melinda Mills and is currently under review at an international peer-reviewed journal.

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Staff turnover is a general concern to managers and academics (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986; e.g. Mobley, 1977; Porter and Steers, 1973), and a particularly pressing issue in the field of humanitarian work, where the retention of a qualified workforce is a problem (Loquercio et al., 2006; Richardson, 2006; Telford and Cosgrave, 2007). High turnover has been widely recognized to be problematic because it leads to high organizational costs for recruiting, selecting, and training new employees (Moynihan and Pandey, 2008; Wright and Bonett, 2007). It potentially hampers organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and workflow, due to loss of institutional memory (Griffeth and Hom, 1995; Loquercio et al., 2006; Price, 2001; Shaw et al., 2005).

In the context of humanitarian aid work, it was long assumed that high turnover would be unavoidable due to the uncertain and often dangerous contexts employees reside in. Humanitarian organizations – in their aim to alleviate the suffering of victims of conflict and natural disaster – deal with complex problems, competing demands, pursue almost unreachable goals, and provide services for which clear performance criteria are often not readily available (Tomasini and Van Wassenhove, 2009). In this context, stress, exhaustion, and trauma – among other risks – could prevent aid workers from pursuing long-lasting careers (Hearns and Deeny, 2007; Walkup, 1997). However, this view has changed in the past decade. It is now claimed that the sector can reduce turnover rates, and even improve its performance through professionalized HRM practices and policies (Loquercio et al., 2006; Walker and Russ, 2010).

Considering the uncertain and complex work environment of aid workers, and the severe problems of retention in the humanitarian sector, we aim to empirically examine two factors that humanitarian organizations can potentially influence to buffer the negative consequences of highly complex and uncertain tasks: role clarity and the quality of social relations among co-workers. Aid workers face task requirements that are inherently ambiguous, complex, voluminous, and uncertain (Seybolt, 2009). In such an environment, creating role clarity – defined as the extent to which employees clearly understand the duties, tasks, objectives, and expectations of their working roles (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Kauppila, 2013) – is a well-known way to reduce uncertainty and decrease employee work-withdrawal behaviors, including turnover intentions (Hassan, 2013; Katz, 1964).

Social relations have increasingly been recognized to have beneficial effects on organizational outcomes, such as turnover (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz and Griffeth, 2004; Mossholder et al., 2005). Social relations with co-workers can be expected to influence turnover intentions (Tubre and Collins, 2000), for example, through the support received from their co-workers in the form of solidarity and information on how to accomplish goals (Raabe and Beehr, 2003). The prevalence of high quality social relations reflects emotional attachment and embeddedness, which would make it harder for employees to leave (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2001; Mossholder et al., 2005).

We argue that especially in a context with uncertain and complex tasks, the interplay between role clarity and social relations among co-workers is crucial to reduce turnover. In the humanitarian context, aid workers are largely dependent on their co-workers to be able to accomplish their complex tasks (Tomasini and Van

Wassenhove, 2009) and decisions require fast coordination between co-workers. High quality social relations have been proven to lead to improved communication and interaction (Riordan and Griffeth, 1995) especially in settings where employees are required to cooperate (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Improved communication and interaction are likely to reduce uncertainty about one's task. Thus, high quality relations with co-workers might be a necessary condition for role clarity to reduce turnover intentions.

Following this reasoning, this study has three goals. First, to empirically examine whether role clarity is important for turnover intentions in this context. Second, to investigate whether high quality relations among co-workers can prevent turnover intentions in the context of humanitarian aid workers. Finally, to examine what extent social relations are a necessary condition for role clarity to achieve reduced turnover intentions in this context.

This study makes several contributions. First, it examines the separate effects and interplay of two possible determinants of turnover, which in combination have received limited attention in contemporary turnover research. These two determinants potentially represent effective entry points for organizational interventions in highly complex and uncertain work environments. By adding relational aspects of turnover, we contribute support for a 'socialized approach' to turnover research (cf. Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). Second, we place our study in the context of humanitarian aid workers, interesting because of its high staff turnover rates and high task ambiguity. Despite their societal importance, humanitarian agencies have received limited academic attention. Quantitative data in this field is scarce due to limited access to this hard-to-reach population (Fechter, 2012; Teegen et al., 2004). We make use of data of a survey amongst 146 employees working for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), one of the largest humanitarian agencies in the field. We localize our research in the general organizational literature, applying established concepts in the context of humanitarian aid workers for the first time.

### **3.2 THEORY**

The tasks of a humanitarian aid worker are inherently complex. This task complexity has various dimensions (cf. Campbell, 1988; Liu and Li, 2012). First, the nature of humanitarian work is uncertain and variable (Seybolt 2009). In humanitarian crises the situation on the ground can rapidly change. For example, security might worsen, an epidemic may suddenly develop, or new groups with different needs might enter a refugee camp. This requires the ability of aid workers to constantly adjust their tasks to the circumstances. Thus, interdependence is high due to unexpected need to coordinate in the case of danger or rapid change. Second, the work itself is very much task interdependent (Tomasini and Van Wassenhove, 2009): aid teams often comprise a variety of specialists, such as health professionals (surgeons, nutritionists, nurses), logisticians, water and sanitation specialists, financial and legal experts, etc. For example, health professionals can only start to work in clinics if logisticians have provided the material and medicine for the clinic, and water and sanitation specialists have secured safe water and waste disposal. Providing aid is very much a collective effort, requiring constant coordination and information exchange, given the variability of the tasks and situations aid workers face.

Although humanitarian organizations cannot reduce the complexity of aid work itself, they can try to reduce the potentially negative consequences of task complexity, and thereby reduce turnover. One way is to address the uncertainty resulting from complex task requirements by facilitating role clarity, which is a proven effective way to reduce turnover in other types of organizations (Hassan, 2013; Jung, 2014; Katz, 1964). However, given the high task interdependence in humanitarian work, it can be expected that simply increasing individuals' role clarity might not be sufficient to buffer the negative effects of high task complexity, and thus prevent turnover. As we argue below, the relational context of aid work – the quality of social relations in the teams – is especially important to buffer the negative side effects of high task complexity.

### **3.2.1 Role clarity and turnover**

A role is usually defined as a set of expectations about behavior for a position in a social structure. For employees the organization is the social structure in which different roles are assigned. Role clarity refers to the extent to which employees clearly understand the duties, tasks, objectives, and expectations of their work roles (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Kauppila, 2013). 'Expectations define behavioral requirements or limits ascribed to the role by the focal person filling that position or by others who relate to the role or simply have notions about it.' (Rizzo et al., 1970, p. 155). Role ambiguity, which is the opposite of and inversely interchangeable with role clarity (Rizzo et al., 1970), occurs when employees are uncertain of what is expected of them (Kauppila, 2013).

Clear knowledge of role expectations is important for an employee to perform effectively and coordinate activities in the work context (Hassan, 2013). If an employee is uncertain of what he or she is supposed to accomplish, and what his or her responsibilities are, chances are high that the employee will be hesitant to make decisions and will rely on a trial and error approach in executing the job (Rizzo et al., 1970). According to role theory, role ambiguity will result in coping strategies; the employee will try to avoid stress by withdrawal, or relieve the strain of a conflictual or ambiguous work situation with defense mechanisms (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970). Consequently role ambiguity will increase the probability that an employee will experience anxiety and frustration as well as reduced job satisfaction, and is thus more likely to start thinking of quitting. A high degree of role ambiguity has repeatedly been found to be positively related to turnover (Johnson and Graen, 1973; Jung, 2014; Rizzo et al., 1970; Van Sell et al., 1981). The other way around, a high degree of role clarity reduces uncertainty about what is expected from the employee, which reduces anxiety and frustration, increases job satisfaction, and thus the inclination to stay working for the organization. This results in our first hypothesis:

*H1: Role clarity will be negatively related to turnover intentions.*

### **3.2.2 Quality of relationships with coworkers and turnover**

An increasing amount of scholars have acknowledged that interpersonal relations may be severely underrated and underutilized in current turnover research (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz and Griffeth, 2004; Mossholder et al., 2005; Riordan and

Griffeth, 1995). Although relational aspects have been present in classic turnover models (Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Mobley, 1977), the empirical literature on turnover mainly examines formal aspects of the organization (e.g., organizational rules, structures, and policies) or individual work attitudes. While these studies contributed substantially to the turnover literature, they are regarded as taking an ‘under-socialized approach’ to the withdrawal process of employees (Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). Since a relational perspective on turnover began receiving more attention (Mossholder et al., 2005), a growing body of studies has empirically verified the importance of social relations for turnover intentions (e.g. Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz and Griffeth, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001; Mossholder et al., 2005; Moynihan and Pandey, 2008; Regts and Molleman, 2013). For example, co-workers’ relations are an important factor in reducing turnover, because these can influence productivity and hierarchical relations, as well as the way work is experienced (Hodson, 1997).

Two mechanisms explain the importance of social relations for reducing turnover intentions. Firstly, individuals engage in interpersonal relationships for functional purposes. In the context of high quality social relations, co-workers will offer advice and information on how to accomplish goals, inform each other of potential chances for advancement, and socially reinforce either good or bad behaviors (Raabe and Beehr, 2003). This facilitates employees to fulfill their individual and collective tasks, which may positively affect job satisfaction and retention. Second, having good social relations satisfies basic human psychological needs. High quality relations based on trust and confidence may satisfy employees’ psychological needs by, for example, providing positive feedback about one’s job competence and through support (Fernet et al., 2010). This is argued to reduce turnover intentions because it results in feelings of embeddedness. The presence of high quality social relations would make it harder for people to leave (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Raabe and Beehr, 2003) because these relations represent a system of deep attachment that serves collective emotional needs (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Maertz and Griffeth, 2004; Mossholder et al., 2005). Care and consideration by co-workers engender emotional bonds, which create feelings of social integration and support from colleagues. This would induce a sense of obligation to co-workers, which increases attachment to the organization and thereby reduces turnover intentions (Mossholder et al., 2005; Moynihan and Pandey, 2008).

In short, high quality social relations can enhance interaction, communication, trust, respect, cooperation, embeddedness, and support, which in turn might influence work-related attitudes (such as job satisfaction) as well as work-related behaviors, such as turnover (Riordan and Griffeth, 1995). Based on the former we expect the following:

*H2: The better the social relations with co-workers, the lower turnover intention an employee will have.*

### **3.2.3 Social relations: a necessary condition for role clarity to help reduce turnover**

In addition to the direct effect hypotheses, we argue that social relations among co-workers could moderate the relation between role clarity and turnover intentions in

the humanitarian context. Specifically, high quality relations might be a necessary condition for role clarity to have its beneficial effects on turnover intentions.

Role theory suggests that role making is a dynamic process. Employees need to acquire knowledge on the demands and constraints of their behavior, receive feedback from co-workers on their behavior in the role, accept a pattern of behavior, and modify it over time to adjust to the situation at hand (Hassan, 2013). This permanent adjustment process is all the more important in the humanitarian context, where tasks are not only uncertain and variable, but also highly interdependent, as argued previously. Given the teamwork nature of humanitarian work, a set of interdependent workers needs to make a substantial number of intermediate decisions to execute tasks successfully. Whereas a humanitarian organization might have originally sent a team to help reduce malnutrition with therapeutic feeding, the outbreak of an epidemic (Ebola or cholera) requires the team to collectively adjust their tasks to the new circumstances. Quick coordination and joint decision-making are thus a daily reality and these requirements make clear communication, coordination, and cooperation between co-workers crucial (Mossholder et al., 2005; Tomasini and Van Wassenhove, 2009). As argued above, high quality social relations facilitate the processes.

This leads us to deduce that even when tasks are perfectly clear to an individual, and role clarity is thus high, the satisfactory execution of humanitarian tasks depends on coordination and communication with co-workers on a collective level. Low quality relationships might hinder coordination and cooperation between colleagues, which could hamper the satisfactory execution of a person's individual tasks, even if role clarity is high. This, in turn, could create frustration and reduce job satisfaction, feelings that are known to increase turnover intentions (Jung, 2014). Good social relations among co-workers, facilitate collective communication, coordination and cooperation, elements that are crucial to accomplish and re-adjust not only collective but also individual tasks.

Based on the above, we argue that turnover intentions among aid workers will only decrease if both on the individual level role clarity is high and at the relational level social relations are of high quality. Hence, we expect high quality social relations to be a necessary condition for role clarity to result in reduced turnover intentions. This leads to our third hypothesis:

*H3: High quality relations will moderate the negative effect of role clarity on turnover. When the quality of relations is high, the effect of role clarity on turnover will be negative.*

### **3.3 DATA AND METHOD**

#### **3.3.1 Data**

To test the proposed hypotheses, we used the primary Humanitarian Employee Survey (HES), which collected data from a sample of expatriate humanitarian aid workers in one of the largest humanitarian aid organizations in the field: Médecins Sans Frontières. MSF is specialized in medical humanitarian emergencies, operating globally in both conflict and natural disaster areas in teams of combining both expatriate and

national staff. The organization has 19 national offices and nine branch offices (MSF International Activity Report, 2012) and in 2012 had a budget of 937.7 million euro.

The research team was granted access in 2011 to conduct the HES to obtain information on the career, job characteristics, and turnover perceptions of expatriate staff working for MSF Operational Center Amsterdam (MSF-OCA). MSF-OCA is responsible for operational and human resource-related matters for the Dutch, German, and British national offices. The HES was sent to 550 expatriate MSF-OCA fieldworkers, the full expatriate workforce at that moment. Expatriate staff in this organization consists of aid workers who work in countries other than their own (an American working in Bangladesh, or a Sudanese person working in Benin).

To ensure optimal response rates among this hard-to-reach population in the most remote parts of the world, we provided two reply options, which were identical in content. The first was a regular online format, for employees whose internet connection was stable enough for the approximately 45 minutes it would take to fill out the survey. The second option was an attachment that could be downloaded when the connection was there, filled in offline, and returned when an internet connection was available again.

Two additional reminders were sent over a period of eight weeks. We received completed surveys from 168 expatriate field workers, 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 provided only the online option. This response is consistent with the average response rate in regular expatriate samples obtained in other studies by Shaffer et al. (2001), Birdseye and Hill (1995), Black and Stephens (1989) and Naumann (1993).

To assess the representativeness of our data, response analyses were performed by comparing the demographic characteristics of the sample with the characteristics of the full organizational population in terms of gender, occupational groups, and nationality. The MSF-OCA HRM department provided this information. Although higher-level employees were slightly overrepresented, the sample was largely representative for occupational groups, gender, and nationality (see Appendix). After removing cases with missing responses on our main variables, we analyzed a final sample of 146. As Table 3.1 shows, the sample has an equal gender split and the average respondent worked an average of 50.9 months (4.2 years) for MSF-OCA. Turnover intentions are on the low side (2.29 out of 5). There were overall high levels of organizational commitment (4.01 out of 5). Role clarity is on average moderately high (3.85 out of 5) and relationships with co-workers are on average of high quality (4.33 out of 5).



**Table 3.1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N=146)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Turnover intention	2.29	0.92					
2. Female (%)	50	NA	0.02				
3. Tenure (in months)	50.94	44.79	0.13*	-0.15**			
4. Organizational commitment	4.01	0.63	-0.30***	0.15**	0.00		
5. Role clarity	3.85	0.51	-0.10	-0.23***	0.21***	0.15**	
6. Relations with co-workers	4.33	0.69	-0.22***	-0.08	0.00	0.18**	0.03

Notes: \*p<.10; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01

### 3.3.2 Measurements

**Dependent variable.** The dependent variable *turnover intention* is measured on a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = always) by the following item: 'How often do you think of quitting your job?' as used in earlier studies investigating the withdrawal process of employees (Hom and Griffeth, 1991; Mobley, 1977).

**Independent variables.** *Role clarity* was measured by six items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) using a pre-tested standard measure by Rizzo et al. (1970). The scale ( $\alpha = .79$ ) included the following items: 'I feel certain about how much authority I have', 'I have clear, planned goals and objectives for my job', 'I know that I have divided my time properly', 'I know what my responsibilities are', 'I know exactly what is expected of me', and 'explanations are clear of what has to be done'. *Relationship with coworkers* was measured by on a 5-point scale (1 = very bad to 5 = very good) by the following item: 'How would you describe relations between colleagues?'

**Control variables.** *Organizational commitment* was measured by 5 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The items for the scale were constructed by combining the organizational commitment scales constructed by Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) and Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). The scale ( $\alpha = .73$ ) included the following items: 'I am proudly talking to others about this organization', 'I do not feel a sense of belonging to my organization', 'I often think that it was a mistake on my part to choose this organization over others I had considered', 'I do not feel emotionally attached to this organization', and 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization'. Items 2, 3, and 4 were coded in reverse direction to indicate more organizational commitment when higher values were indicated. *Tenure* was measured by the total amount of months working within the organization without rest and retreat periods. *Gender* was controlled for by including a dummy variable *female* (= 1).

### 3.3.3 Method of Analysis

Ordinary Least-Squares Regression was used to estimate three models. The first includes only the controls to examine possible differences in explaining turnover intentions. The second model adds role clarity and social relations with co-workers to test our first two hypotheses. The third model contains the proposed interaction effect between role clarity and relationships with co-workers. All variables are centered at their grand means. Dummy variables and the dependent variable were left in their raw metrics. Table 3.1 reveals that the assumption of no multicollinearity was met since none of the independent variables is highly correlated.

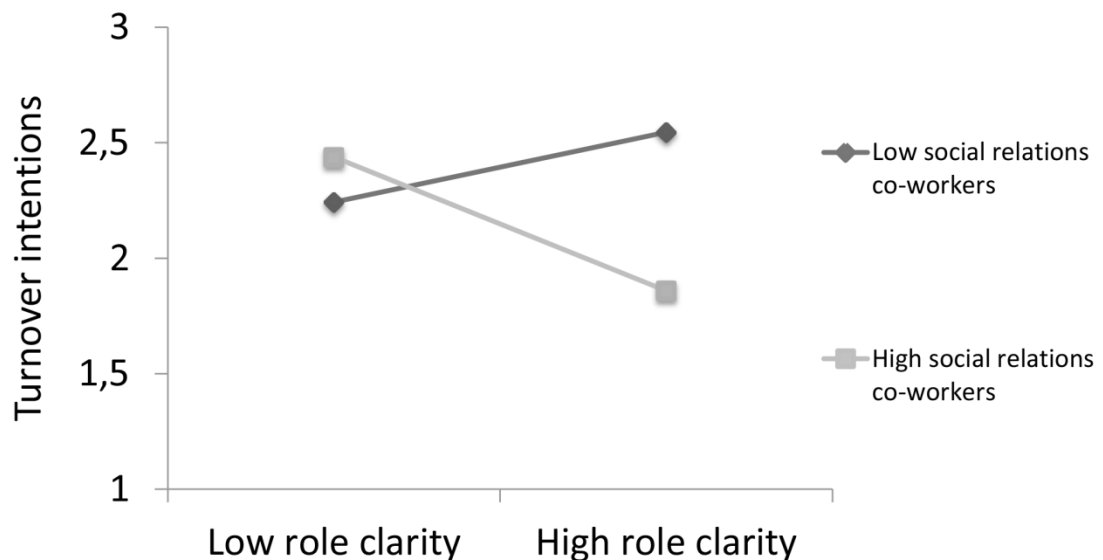
## 3.4 RESULTS

Table 3.1 shows that while positive social relations ( $r = -0.22, p < 0.01$ ) are negatively related to turnover intentions, role clarity seems unrelated to turnover intentions ( $r = -0.10, ns$ ). It further shows that gender is negatively associated with role clarity, indicating that women have less role clarity than men do. Tenure and organizational commitment are both positively associated with role clarity. Table 3.2 shows the results of the regression analyses.

**Table 3.2.** Regression analyses on turnover intentions (N = 146)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	p-value	B	SE B	p-value	B	SE B	p-value
Female	0.15	0.15	0.31	0.08	0.15	0.58	0.05	0.15	0.74
Tenure (in months)	0.00	0.00	0.08	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.10
Organizational commitment	-0.45	0.12	0.00	-0.38	0.12	0.00	-0.39	0.12	0.00
Role clarity				-0.13	0.15	0.38	-0.14	0.15	0.36
Social relations co-workers				-0.22	0.11	0.04	-0.18	0.11	0.09
Role clarity * social relations Co-workers							-0.63	0.24	0.01
R2	.11			.14			.18		
F	5.873			4.566			5.093		

H1, which predicted a direct negative effect of role clarity on turnover intentions ( $\beta = -0.13$ , ns) does not find support in our analyses (see Model 2 in Table 3.2). Perceived role clarity does not directly lead to reduced turnover intentions. Consistent with H2, good social relations with co-workers is related to lower turnover intentions ( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Those indicating that the relationship with colleagues is good indicate lower levels of turnover intentions than employees, indicating less favorable relationships between colleagues. Model 3 tested H3 on the interplay between social relations with co-workers and role clarity (see Table 3.2 and Figure 3.1). Model 3 included the interaction term between role clarity and social relations. We expected the negative relation between role clarity and turnover intentions to only exist for employees who indicated high quality social relations. Model 3 shows that role clarity is indeed negatively associated with turnover intentions for employees who indicate good social relations between colleagues ( $\beta = -0.63$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).



**Figure 3.1.** Interaction between role clarity and social relations among co-workers

As Figure 3.1 illustrates, only for employees indicating high quality social relations the effect of role clarity on turnover intentions is negative. The direction of the relation seems to be reversed for employees who indicate low quality social relations. A closer examination of both groups by means of a simple slope analysis (not shown) showed the negative relation between role clarity and turnover intentions to be significant for employees with high quality social relations, and a positive effect for employees, indicating lower quality social relations to be insignificant. H3 is therefore supported: the negative relation between role clarity and turnover intentions holds only for employees indicating high quality social relations with co-workers. For employees indicating low quality social relations, role clarity is not associated with reduced turnover intentions. Therefore, role clarity reduces turnover intentions only when social relationships are perceived to be good. Not surprisingly, we see that organizational commitment is negatively related to turnover intentions. Gender is unrelated and tenure seems slightly positively related to turnover intentions.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The goal of the current study was to investigate the effect of two determinants, namely role clarity and the quality of social relations, and their interplay on turnover intentions in the field of humanitarian aid work. Results show that role clarity has no direct effect on turnover intentions (H1). The absence of this relation might be due to the highly dynamic environment in which humanitarian employees conduct their tasks. Achieving role clarity in an uncertain, complex environment where goals are often conflicting requires constant re-adjustment and modification over time (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Schaubroeck and Fink, 1998). As expected, high quality relationships among co-workers reduces turnover intentions (H2). The moderation model between both variables reveals that role clarity reduces turnover intentions, but only if the relationship quality among co-workers is high (H3). Good relations with co-workers are conducive to the continuous modification process regarding the expected roles among humanitarian aid workers.

These findings contribute to and extend the literature on turnover behavior by examining how role clarity and social relationships among coworkers influence turnover intentions among employees of a humanitarian organization. To the best of our knowledge, research so far has ignored the potential association between role clarity, and social relations among coworkers and turnover intentions. This study is among the first to empirically examine these relationships in the humanitarian working environment characterized by task complexity.

Before addressing the general implications and further contributions of our study, we should mention some caveats to our findings. First, while being among the first to collect data from this hard-to-reach population of humanitarian aid workers, the data were collected among employees from a single organization, thus limiting generalizability to the wider humanitarian field, or beyond. Second, despite the consistency with our theoretical reasoning, the cross-sectional design of our study precludes causal inferences, and future studies will certainly benefit from longitudinal research designs. Third, notwithstanding the impact of social relations, the distribution of this variable was highly right skewed, indicating that relationships among co-workers were on average of high quality. Still there was a substantial difference between employees indicating 'good' relations and those indicating 'very good' relations. This might be partly due to social desirability and the natural tendency of people not liking to admit having bad relations. Another part might be due to the way it was measured: a one-item variable asked how the employee would describe relationships with colleagues. While this is in line with our general reasoning, including other aspects of the quality relations (e.g., perceived support, communication, obligation to co-workers, and interpersonal citizenship behavior; see Mossholder Settoon and Henagan (2005) is advisable for future research to further disentangle the exact mechanisms underlying the relation between this variable and turnover intentions.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study can be considered noteworthy in several ways. First, our study suggests that even for employees who work in highly dynamic environments where tasks are complex and uncertain, role clarity can still make a difference. Likewise, despite the fact that these employees often do not have a permanent location to work – resulting in an ever-changing team compositions – social

relations with co-workers are important for turnover intentions. Furthermore, the examination of the interplay between these two factors shows that the beneficial effects of role clarity for turnover intentions are only present when relationships with co-workers are of high quality. The results provide new insight into the conditions under which role clarity can reduce turnover intentions among humanitarian aid workers.

Second, this study provides direct support for the idea that work relationships matter, and it validates recent contentions that their development and nature influences important organizational outcomes (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Mossholder et al., 2005; Moynihan and Pandey, 2008; Regts and Molleman, 2013; Riordan and Griffeth, 1995). Although conceptual frameworks have placed turnover in the context of relational processes (e.g. attachment, separation, exchange), most scholars have not explicitly emphasized the effects of relational variables on turnover (Mossholder et al., 2005; Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). Over the last two decades, the theoretical relevance of a relational perspective on turnover has begun to receive greater attention, thereby establishing an incentive to examine turnover through a relational perspective. Based on our findings we agree with Mossholder et al. (2005) who suggest that 'relational predictors may contain unique information about withdrawal and hold promise for solving another piece of the turnover puzzle' (p. 616). Our results indicate that when scholars study turnover phenomena, interpersonal relationships with co-workers may be critical to consider along with the more typically emphasized individual, attitudinal, and organizational characteristics. Consequently, a practical implication stemming from our findings would be for organizations to encourage social relations among their co-workers. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to find the source of high quality relations, organizations that encourage social interaction opportunities among employees and foster shared responsibilities and teamwork are more likely to create high quality social relations among co-workers (Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). Another practical implication of our study is that assisting aid workers to achieve role clarity can promote reduced turnover intentions, as long as the social relations are also of good quality. Employees can be assisted to gain role clarity with clear job descriptions prior to departure and ongoing refinement of job descriptions while on the job. Whereas clear job descriptions from HRM departments or team managers are in itself not sufficient to retain an employee, our analyses suggest that they can be an important complementary instrument to achieve reduced turnover. This finding resonates with a large share of HRM research advocating on the one hand a contingency approach to HRM – promoting HRM practices that fit the particular work context of the organization, in our case humanitarian work – and on the other hand a 'bundled' approach to HRM, emphasizing the importance of combining a congruent set of HRM practices (Baron and Kreps, 1999; Delery and Doty, 1996).

Third, empirically our study is among the first systematic data collections on role clarity and social relations of employees in the humanitarian sector. Most research on these topics (separately) has been conducted in the for-profit sector (e.g. Riordan and Griffeth, 1995; Schaubroeck and Fink, 1998), to a lesser extent in the public sector (Cox, 1999; Mossholder et al., 2005; Regts and Molleman, 2013) and rarely in the non-profit sector (Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). To our knowledge, this is the first empirical attempt to study these topics in the humanitarian context. Despite their

societal importance, limited academic and empirical attention has been paid to these issues in humanitarian organizations, also because quantitative data in this field is scarce (Fechter, 2012; Teegen et al., 2004). This study shows that, as these humanitarian organizations struggle to retain qualified employees (Loquercio et al., 2006), the relevance of role clarity and social relations should not be overlooked.