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### Loyalty in humanity

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# 6

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

## 6.1 CONCLUSION

Staff turnover among humanitarian employees has been a problem for humanitarian organizations throughout the years. Not only is it expensive with regard to constant recruitment and training of new employees, it also hinders efficiency of operations (Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006). For long it has been assumed that due to the uncertain and often dangerous contexts in which aid work is conducted, turnover would be unavoidable. However, in the past decade, scholars and practitioners who believe in the power of professionalized personnel practices and policies increasingly challenge this somewhat pessimistic view (Loquercio et al., 2006; Walker & Russ, 2010). There was little systematic empirical evidence to back this claim. This dissertation is among the first attempts to bridge this gap. Building on a social-embeddedness framework, and using first-hand empirical data collected from one of the largest organizations in the field, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, this dissertation shows that the success of MSF's formal attempts to increase retention by influencing turnover-related employee attitudes crucially depend on the quality of an aid worker's informal relationships with management and co-workers.

This concluding chapter briefly summarizes the main findings of each chapter. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical, methodological and practical contributions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## 6.2 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Chapter 2 focused on the effect of job autonomy and trust in management on *work-life balance satisfaction*. Work-life balance has been found to be an important predictor of the intention to leave in the for-profit sector. In the context of humanitarian aid, work-life balance seems particularly under pressure. Because humanitarian employees often reside outside their typical life environment, conventional measures conducive to creating work-life balance in the for-profit sector are often not an option (e.g. reducing work hours, schedule flexibility or changing work location). Another option often provided to manage a healthy work-life balance is *job autonomy* (i.e. an employee's control over the order of tasks, the pace and organization of work). Autonomy enables employees to better balance work and non-work demands, but it can also have adverse effects on employee well-being if employees do not *trust their management* to support them if the decisions they take turn out to be wrong or have negative consequences for the organization and its stakeholders. We therefore examined whether the effect of autonomy on the satisfaction with work-life balance differed for employees who trust management, compared to employees who do not. We found that when trust in management of the organization is low, the effect of autonomy on work-life balance is negative. When trust in management is high, autonomy has a positive effect on work-life balance, indicating a buffering effect of trust in management on the negative effects of high autonomy. Hence, in line with our social embeddedness argument, the effect of autonomy on work-life satisfaction strongly depends on an employee's trust in management.

Chapter 3 asked to what extent *role clarity* and the quality of *co-worker relations* affect *turnover intentions*? Rapid decision-making in an ever-changing or even dangerous environment requires both perceived clarity of one's task and smooth

coordination among employees. In settings with low quality co-worker relations, coordination and cooperation might be hindered which could hamper the satisfactory execution of a person's individual tasks, even if role clarity is high. This, in turn, could create feelings of frustration and reduced job satisfaction among employees, feelings that are known to increase turnover intentions. We found that role clarity indeed only reduces turnover intentions for those employees reporting high quality co-worker relations.

Chapter 4 studied to what extent *job training* and *trust in management* affect *organizational commitment*. The employees divided the training they received in categories according to how they perceive the usability of the skills in the outside labor market (in other organizations within or outside the sector). The more transferable the skills learned in the training are to other organizations, the larger will be the perceived gift of training, resulting in higher organizational commitment. We found that even in an organization where levels of organizational commitment are already disproportionately high, training that employees perceive to help increase employability on the external labor market increases commitment even more. Only for a specific group of employees, those with high trust in management who have received only training which they perceive only to be useful within the own organization (MSF) and not outside the organization, organizational commitment slightly decreases. However, when employees additionally receive training that they perceive as useful outside the organization, this decrease is reversed.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the question of how *high-involvement HRM* practices may affect the *intention to leave*. The goal of high-involvement HRM is to make better use of employee capacities for self-management, personal development, and problem solving. Two mechanisms were examined. The first suggests that these practices directly influence *job satisfaction*, which in turn leads to lower turnover. The second one is relational, and emphasizes the importance of *trust in management*. Structural equation modeling showed that high-involvement HRM practices do not have a direct effect on turnover, but indirectly do so because they increase trust in management and job satisfaction.

### **6.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR**

Given the paucity of research on turnover in the non-profit and humanitarian sector, this dissertation builds on and extends current explanations, as these were developed to explain turnover in the for-profit sector. Whereas this literature has already highlighted the importance of the social context during the early 1970s, only recently has the role of interpersonal relations been acknowledged as insufficiently incorporated in today's turnover models (Lopes Morrison, 2005; Maertz & Griffeth, 2004; Mossholder, Settoon, & Henagan, 2005; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995). Our four studies suggest that formal HRM practices *did* shape turnover-related attitudes at MSF Holland, and that the informal social context in which employees are embedded does indeed play a pivotal role for these practices to be effective.

Overall, our social embeddedness argument and the related findings suggest two general conclusions. First, our findings are in line with earlier contingency frameworks for strategic HRM (Baron and Kreps, 1999; Paauwe, 2004). They state that

high-involvement HRM practices achieve the desired effects only if they are consistent not only with one another, but also with the specific organizational context. Our study focuses on the dimension of the organizational context: the degree of 'informal' social embeddedness of both, the hierarchical relation with management, and the horizontal relation with co-workers. Specifically, our studies showed the strong impact of *co-worker relations* and *trust in management* as a context condition (or mediator) with decisive impact on how job design and high-involvement HRM practices affect turnover-related attitudes like satisfaction with the job or work-life balance, intention to leave, and organizational commitment. Trust in management turned out to be a context condition for rendering three HRM or job design policies effective for employees with trust in management: (a) offering firm-specific training *decreases* organizational commitment; (b) high autonomy increases work-life satisfaction; and (c) high-involvement HRM practices increase trust in management, which in turn results in higher job satisfaction and lower turnover. Similarly, good co-worker relations turned out to be pivotal for role clarity to reduce the intention to leave.

Second, our study demonstrates the importance of disentangling individual-level behavioral mechanisms to model potentially intended and unintended consequences of organizational interventions. Table 6.1 provides a summary of the behavioral mechanisms we used to explain the inter-relationship between (formal and informal) organizational conditions and turnover-related attitudes.



**Table 6.1.** Summary of behavioral mechanisms and findings of empirical chapters (2-5)

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Outcomes and Predictors</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b> <b>Enabling resources</b>	Autonomy enables employees to better balance work and non-work demands. Since decisions can have far-reaching consequences, trust in management can provide a sense of support for autonomy to have its effect.	<i>Outcome:</i> Work-life balance (WLB) <i>Predictor:</i> Autonomy <i>Moderator:</i> Trust in management
<b>Chapter 3</b> <b>Reducing uncertainty and complexity</b>	Role clarity can potentially buffer the negative consequences of complex and uncertain tasks. These tasks require fast coordination between co-workers, which makes high quality relations a necessary condition for role clarity to reduce turnover intentions.	<i>Outcome:</i> Turnover intentions <i>Predictor:</i> Role clarity <i>Moderator:</i> Social relations co-workers
<b>Chapter 4</b> <b>Gift exchange/ Signaling</b>	General training is perceived as a positive signal, because it is costly and risky for the firm. Firm-specific training is considered a negative signal if trust in management is high, because it violates strong reciprocity expectations.	<i>Outcome:</i> Organizational commitment <i>Predictor:</i> Job training <i>Moderator:</i> Trust in management
<b>Chapter 5</b> <b>Individual vs. Relational mechanism</b>	Two mechanisms for the influence of high-involvement HRM practices on turnover intentions are tested. One on the individual level via job satisfaction and one on the relational level with trust in management mediating this relation. See Figure 5.1 in Chapter 5.	<i>Outcomes:</i> Turnover intention; Job satisfaction; Trust in management <i>Predictors:</i> High-involvement HRM practices <i>Mediators:</i> Trust in management; job satisfaction

**Table 6.1.** Continued

Hypotheses	Findings
<p><i>H1: Autonomy → work-life balance (WLB) (+)</i></p> <p><i>H2: Trust in management → WLB (+)</i></p> <p><i>H3a: Autonomy will have a positive effect on the satisfaction with WLB for expatriate humanitarian employees who have high levels of trust in management.</i></p> <p><i>H3b: Autonomy will have a negative effect on the satisfaction with WLB for expatriate humanitarian employees who have low levels of trust in management.</i></p>	<p>When levels of autonomy are high while trust in management is low, the effect of autonomy on WLB is negative. If trust in management is high autonomy has a positive effect on WLB, indicating a buffering effect of trust in management on negative effects of high autonomy.</p>
<p><i>H1: Role clarity → turnover intentions (-)</i></p> <p><i>H2: Social relations → turnover intention (-)</i></p> <p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>Role clarity only reduces turnover intentions if social relations with co-workers are of high quality.</p>
<p><i>H1: Training → organizational commitment (+)</i></p> <p><i>H2: The more general the training, the stronger the effect on commitment: the effect is weakest for firm-specific training, intermediate for sector-specific training, and strongest for general training.</i></p> <p><i>H3: Trust in management → organizational commitment (+)</i></p> <p><i>H4a: Sector-specific or general training will increase commitment only of high-trust employees.</i></p> <p><i>H4b: Firm-specific training will decrease commitment of only high-trust employees.</i></p>	<p>Training that staff perceives to help increase employability on the external labor market increases commitment. Only for a specific group of employees – those with high trust in management who perceive to have followed only firm-specific training organizational commitment slightly decreased</p>
<p><i>H1: High-involvement HRM practices → turnover intentions (-)</i></p> <p><i>H2: High-involvement HRM practices have a positive influence on job satisfaction, which in turn negatively influences turnover intentions.</i></p> <p><i>H3: Trust in management will mediate the relation between high-involvement HRM practices and job satisfaction.</i></p>	<p>The mere presence of high-involvement HRM practices does not inevitably lead to increased job satisfaction, whereas the relational level by means of trust in management is very important in reaching higher levels of job satisfaction and thereby reduced turnover intentions.</p>



#### **6.4 METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: SURVEY RESEARCH AMONG HUMANITARIAN AID WORKERS**

Humanitarian aid workers are a hard-to-reach population, particularly when on a mission or in the field, and therefore most studies in this sector are predominantly explorative in nature, mainly relying on self-reported material or qualitative interviews among small samples (e.g. Bjerneld, Lindmark, Diskett, & Garrett, 2004; Loquercio et al., 2006). Consequently, conventional ways of collecting survey data must be adapted to accommodate the specific constraints imposed by the context. Online surveys are usually too 'heavy' for the computers or internet connections available in the field. Paper surveys are also not an option since the chance that these will arrive in the field are already slim, let alone that they will return safely to a university on the other side of the world. Phone questionnaires suffer the same problems. In our study, a decent response rate could be achieved through close cooperation with the members of the organization, in particular the ICT Department. MSF officers were well aware of the possibilities and limitations of distributing a survey among employees working in the field, and helped to tailor the instrument and mode of data collection to the specific needs of the surveyed population.

A major asset of our study is that it allowed tapping into individual's perceptions and turnover-related attitudes, rather than having to rely on proxies at the level of individual or organizational attributes. This is in line with the general urge to consider perceptions, since they are more salient in their impact on individuals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), i.e. if individuals perceive a situation as real, it will also be real in its consequences, and therefore determine their attitudes (Merton, 1968). The result of using this tailored research instrument, the *Humanitarian Employment Survey* (HES), resulted in one of the first datasets containing detailed individual-level perceptions of aid workers.

A limitation of our study is that it is cross-sectional, restricted to a single organization, and the findings cannot be generalized to the humanitarian sector as a whole. Future research might benefit from conducting longitudinal employee surveys in a larger sample of humanitarian organizations. Such endeavor would benefit from including objective measures of employee turnover as recorded by the organization, and from implementing finely grained *relational* measures of trust in management and the quality of co-worker relations, e.g. by using sociometric questions tapping into the informal social networks of employees and management.

#### **6.5 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: REDUCING TURNOVER IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR**

High rates of employee turnover are a major concern to organizations in the humanitarian sector. Our study may contain potentially useful insights for HRM practitioners having to deal with this problem. This research validates the results of early case studies, but also points to at least two important new insights of practical relevance.

First, it has often been claimed that humanitarian workers differ fundamentally from employees in other sectors (in terms of motivation, work environment, etc.), which would be one of the reasons why conventional methods of management and

HRM, as used in the for-profit sector, would not work or have detrimental effects (Eikenberry, 2009; Hopgood, 2008). Despite the distinct differences – such as high levels of organizational commitment, autonomy, and job satisfaction – our findings suggest that: humanitarian aid workers respond to HRM practices much like employees in other sectors. Hence, the use of HRM and job design may indeed be a feasible, effective way to influence turnover-related attitudes and eventually reduce turnover in the humanitarian sector as well.

Second, our social-embeddedness approach highlights the importance of creating a working environment in which employees perceive their work relations as of good quality and their management to be trustworthy. The high-involvement HRM literature contains many suggestions on practices enhancing trust and social cohesion (Gould-Williams, 2003; Tzafrir, 2005). For example, open communication, information sharing, participatory decision-making and fairness of performance appraisal processes have been found to increase trust in management. Similarly, formal socialization programs were found to effectively increase employee motivation at MSF (Korff, 2012), and may have a positive impact on feelings of embeddedness, trust, and high quality work relations.

In sum, at least for the organization under investigation, our findings question some of the skeptical remarks on the humanitarian sector's attempts to professionalize its workforce and its organizational routines. Moreover, it seems that much may still be achieved by implementing context-specific HRM practices.

