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Career Development, Workplace Culture, Work–Family Conflict, and Intention to Leave: A Conceptual Framework for Public Hospitals in Guizhou, China

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, retaining a healthcare workforce has emerged as a challenge for public hospitals (particularly in rural areas) due to the disparity of economics and because of structural constraints to health services. For example, public hospitals in Guizhou, China, face a shortage of doctors and nurses and inadequate institutional resources while experiencing a high workload which causes an increasing intent to leave the profession by many healthcare workers. While current research has identified that career development, workplace culture, and work–family conflict shape the intention to leave the profession, most of the existing literature remains fragmented, empirically biased and not adequately reflective of the unique regional and institutional contexts of healthcare professionals. Therefore, this conceptual paper examines the limitations of the current research and proposes a framework that will provide insight into how career development, workplace culture and work–family conflict is interrelated and collectively impact the intention of Guizhou's healthcare professionals to leave a public hospital. By aligning this new framework with existing theoretical foundation namely, the Psychological Contract Theory that is related to career development, organisational support and work–family interface, the researchers illustrate that without opportunities to develop professionally, support from their employer and relief from work–family pressures, healthcare professionals will have a decreased level of commitment and increased likelihood of leaving their profession. This conceptual paper situates these factors within Guizhou's socio-economic context, thereby, contributing to theoretical understanding of turnover-related attitudes in resource-constrained healthcare. It also highlights the implications of healthcare workforce stability expanding beyond the issue of healthcare reform and contributing directly to China's regional economic development, through the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals related to health and decent work and reduced inequalities. Therefore, this framework provides a strong basis upon which to build future research and develop comprehensive and sustainable retention plans for public healthcare organisations.

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1. Introduction

All over the world, healthcare systems are purported to struggle in retaining skilled employees, especially in the public sector where there are limited resources and increasing demand for services [22-25]. Doctors and nurses face many challenges since they are said to have large caseloads to handle, the demands of an ever-growing patient population, adapting to new medical technology and an increased volume of administrative requirements [40]. The stress and pressure associated with these factors can lead to emotional exhaustion, decreased job satisfaction, and eventually a desire to leave either the organisation or the field of health care altogether [21]. Therefore, retention has become one of the major issues facing both healthcare management and policy today because instability within the workforce has a direct impact on the quality of care provided, the operational effectiveness of the organisation and the safety of patients served.

Public healthcare institutions make up the foundation of the Chinese national healthcare system, providing the greatest variety of necessary healthcare to most of the population of China [39-46]. Healthcare practitioners who work within public hospitals face a wide range of extremely challenging experiences. Typical experiences include long working hours, high patient numbers, low levels of autonomy, and a high level of pressure to perform [3-9]. In economically disadvantaged provinces such as Guizhou, these challenges are compounded by the lack of financial support, limited organisational capacity, and a severe shortage of qualified personnel within these organisations [22]. Furthermore, in these environments, there are limited options for the advancement of employees' careers, inflexible and rigid cultures within the workplace, and little support from the organisation in balancing employees' work and personal lives [22].

Consequently, there has recently been a growth in the intention to leave the public hospital workforce among doctors and nurses within the public health establishment within Guizhou Province, China [38]. Such increased expression of intent to leave may put the long-term viability of the public health services in this area at risk, as high rates of turnover compromise the ability to provide continuous care [22]. Moreover, high rates of turnover also increase the expense of recruiting and training new personnel [45], which could further exacerbate the already heavy workload of those employees who remain with the organisation.

Researchers have examined variables that can cause employees in healthcare to express a positive intention to leave their organisation [52]. However, much of this research has been based on the study of individual variables or on other regions with developed economies such as Turkey [6]. In lieu of this, the researchers highly deemed that more theoretically integrated and context-specific research is needed to help explain the effect of various organisational and personal factors on the expression of positive intent to leave a public healthcare system's workforce in areas where healthcare is less developed [49].

Accordingly, the main purpose of this research is to examine the influence of career development opportunities, workplace culture, and work-family conflict towards turnover intention among medical staff in Guizhou, China. By constructing a conceptual model, this research seeks to clarify the pathways influencing turnover intention in public healthcare institutions. The findings from the recommended empirical research in the future, through the adoption of this proposed conceptual framework, it is hoped can enrich theoretical understanding of workforce stability within healthcare organisations. Besides, it is also expected to produce practical implications for hospital human resource management, policy formulation, and sustainable talent retention strategies in the context of ongoing healthcare reformation, specifically in China.

2. Problem Statement and Literature Review

2.1 Problem Statement

Although there is a significant amount of research on healthcare turnover intention, some major issues remain unsolved, especially for public hospitals located in developing areas of China [50]. While the vast majority of published studies agree professionals' career development, workplace culture, and work–family conflict significantly influence the decision to leave their organisation, most of these studies have been empirically based, focusing exclusively on direct cause and effect relationships without adequately examining the ways that these influences interact within the context of specific institutional and socio-economic environments [31]. Therefore, the current literature provides very little in terms of a coherent theoretical perspective that would explain the mechanisms through which healthcare professionals working in public hospitals with limited resources decide to leave the healthcare profession.

A significant shortcoming of the current literature is that there are no integrated theoretical models that connect career development [19], workplace culture [16], and work–family conflict together [7]. Most of the studies in this area consider these factors separately, thus failing to consider the combined effect of all three factors on healthcare professionals' decision-making process. In reality, a limited number of career development options generally coexist with unsupportive workplace cultures and several high levels of work–family conflict, particularly in publicly funded, understaffed hospitals [7]. A lack of an integrated model makes it difficult to explore how these three factors can amplify the other's effects and thus produce a greater impact on healthcare professionals' decision to leave the profession [20-32].

The literature has a notable gap regarding the disparity regarding the focus on less economically developed provinces such as Guizhou [43]. Most of the existing body of research is conducted in urban areas or more developed regions that have more extensive institutional resources available to support training and development than do rural or less economically developed areas such as Guizhou, making application of findings from these locations to a province such as Guizhou a significant oversimplification and increases the likelihood of ineffective retention strategies [23]. Due to this, there is a need for conceptual research to consider the structural constraints, cultural characteristics, and socioeconomics of public hospitals in Guizhou explicitly when analysing the literature on this topic.

Additionally, although research has highlighted the importance of career development for retention, it is often treated as a singular concept [19]. The research fails to take into account that career development has many components (e.g., structural career development opportunities, perceived organisational support, and individual career development expectations) [17]. If these factors are out of alignment, healthcare professionals will often have unmet expectations and believe that there has been a breach of their psychological contract with the organisation, which will significantly increase their intention to leave [13,47-54]. Existing literature has not developed a theoretical framework for understanding these processes as they apply within Chinese public hospitals.

To overcome these limitations, a new framework is proposed that integrates career development, workplace culture, and work-family conflict as influencing factors on the intention to leave by healthcare professionals in Guizhou, China. By applying a range of theoretical frameworks and placing this research in a defined geographical area, it is hoped that this research will contribute significantly to the current knowledge base and will enhance future research and policy formation.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 Intention to leave

Intention to leave refers to an individual's conscious and deliberate consideration of leaving an organisation. It is widely regarded as the most reliable predictor of actual turnover. In healthcare, high levels of intention to leave have serious consequences, including service disruption, increased costs, and declining quality of care [10]. Research has identified numerous antecedents of intention to leave, including burnout, job dissatisfaction, perceived injustice, and limited professional growth [10].

Career development, workplace culture, and work–family conflict consistently emerge as key determinants of intention to leave [8]. Yet, through thorough literature review, the researchers noticed that the existing research has not sufficiently explained how these factors operate together within specific organisational and regional contexts [8]. Thus, this limitation highlights the need for integrative conceptual research that captures the complexity of turnover-related decisions among healthcare professionals.

2.2.2 Career development

Career Development entails the continual procedure through which people obtain the expertise, experience, and abilities necessary for their professional development and achievement [53]. As it pertains to medical careers, early theories centred on the establishment of an individual's professional identity and how their personal values matched up with how they were viewed in the workplace. More recent approaches have noted both the responsibility of the individual and of the organisation to assist them in developing professionally [42]. Because of the continued rapid evolution of both medical knowledge, technology, and professional expectations, career development in the medical field is essential [14]. It is noted that the provision of training, clear and vivid promotion pathways, mentoring, and leadership roles significantly contributes to healthcare professionals' motivation and commitment to their organisations.

Career Development systems that exist in public hospitals demonstrate an organisation's long-term commitment to its employees. Doctors and nurses who perceive their organisation's support for their career development will likely feel more valued and develop an image of their future within that organisation. A lack of or an unclear understanding of career development opportunities will likely lead to and contribute to feelings of being "stuck", frustration, and decreased professional identity in the employee. This will particularly impact areas like Guizhou, which face many difficulties in providing adequate advanced training and promotion opportunities due to financial and institutional limitations.

Overall, the current body of knowledge consistently shows a flipside relationship between career development and a person's decision to leave an organisation. Nonetheless, there are gaps in this knowledge related to understanding how a healthcare worker perceives or experiences career development opportunities will depend on their organisational culture and environment. Therefore, there is a demand for conceptual research that describes how an organisation's culture influences perceptions of career development opportunities and subsequently, an individual worker's intention to leave.

2.2.3 Workplace culture

The culture within a workplace comprises the values, beliefs, norms, behaviour expectations and other factors that affect the way employees interact with each other on a daily basis [35]. A workplace culture that advocates "supportive" type relationships usually stem from trust,

collaboration, recognition and open communication. Supportive workplace cultures create a work environment that provides employees with good mental health and emotional bonds to their organisation [37].

On the other hand, unsupported or unamicable workplace culture, particularly in many of the poorer countries where public hospitals are located, can lead to job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion and disengagement of employees [27]. A workplace culture that values authority, seniority and compliance rather than employee participation in the workplace culture can create an environment that limits employee autonomy, ultimately decreases their level of commitment to the organisation over time [27].

Recent research has shown that workplace culture not only influences the desire to leave an organisation but also influences an employee's perception of how the organisation will provide for their career development needs human resource management [29]. When a workplace culture is perceived to be unaccommodating, even when career development opportunities are available, employees may feel that they are inaccessible or unfairly distributed [55]. Nevertheless, very few studies to date have taken into consideration the context of career development and work-family conflict when determining an employee's intention to leave an organisation in a supportive workplace environment. Such occurrences have motivated the researchers to propose a conceptual framework that integrates the element of career development and work-family conflict which can later be extended for empirical research.

2.2.4 Work–family conflict

The interplay between caregiving at home and work is a conflict inherent in society that leaves caregivers with an overwhelming burden due to incompatibility of rosters to fulfil both family and work obligations [51]. Healthcare professionals are especially vulnerable or susceptible to this type of conflict since work demands tend to occur at all hours of the day as well as have variability of hours worked which may generate emotional fatigue for workers. Their duty rosters are reported to often unpredictable, subsequently leading to increased illness, decreased work performance, and decreased satisfaction in their careers [2].

The combination of insufficient numbers of nursing staff with increased workloads with little flexibility can contribute to an even greater likelihood of work–family conflict for health professionals [1] especially within an under-resourced environment such as Guizhou, China [51]. Limited institutional resources mean little in-house support for healthcare professionals in managing challenging and demanding commitments [5]. Hence, the combination of work–family conflict with a lack of career advancement opportunities coupled with a lack of supportive workplace cultures may create a perception of employee work environments as being not sustainable therefore, increasing the likelihood of an employee to seek alternative employment.

Although many studies acknowledge that work–family conflict is a significant factor influencing the intention to resign, most studies of work–family conflict examining public health settings treat work–family conflict as a single entity [15]. In another words, this variable is being studied without examining the dynamic relationships created when work–family conflict is combined with other organisational conditions impacting employee turnover-related attributes. It also purported that there are lacks theoretical framework explaining how the interaction of work–family conflict, organisational support for work–family conflict, and employee turnover-related attributes that might influence turnover for healthcare professionals in the public healthcare sector [11]. The researchers hence are motivated to write this conceptual paper with the aim to propose the conceptual framework incorporating work–family conflict as an initial phase prior to extending it to empirical work.

2.3 Underpinning Theory and Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed research framework as depicted in Figure 1 is grounded by the Psychological Contract Theory, originally introduced by Argyris [4] and later developed and formalised by Rousseau [33-34]. The Psychological Contract is a theory that helps us understand the internal expectations that exist between employees and organisations about how they will work together. This includes things such as career development, fair treatment, support from the organisation, and the working environment. The psychological contract is different from a formal employment contract because it considers how an employee perceives the organisation has kept its promises. When an employee feels that the psychological contract has been fulfilled, that employee is more committed and engaged [26]. However, when they feel that there has been a violation of the psychological contract, the employee is likely to have negative attitudes, including dissatisfaction, quiet quitting, withdrawal and/or intention to leave [26].

The psychological contract is the best way to explain how each independent variable in the proposed research affects the employee's intention to leave [12]. Career development, workplace culture, work-family conflict are critical factors through which employees determine whether the organisation has honoured its implicit obligations. In this way, the psychological contract provides a strong foundation for examining how each independent variable directs the employee's intention to leave [12].

Employees often enter a job with the expectation that their commitment and contributions as an employee will be matched by the company providing them with opportunities to develop their career through the company's support of growth and skill development, as well as opportunity for advancement and growth through their careers [24]. Career development is thus a key point of the psychological contract for an employee working in a professional and knowledgeable field. An organisation providing an employee with a clear career progression (e.g., promotion opportunities, as well as training opportunities) to support their career goals increases the employees' perception that the organisation is fulfilling their obligations for employee career development [24].

When this happens, the result is an increase in an employee's level of trust, as well as an increase in an employee's level of organisational commitment, which also indirectly decreases an employee's intention to leave the organisation [30]. Conversely, if an employee does not have access to clear definitions of advancement, and their career development opportunities are limited or they perceive these opportunities to be 'unfair or misleading', the employee might feel as though the organisation has not lived up to their commitment for developing their career accordingly [30]. This kind of perception may lead to feelings of frustration, decreased motivation, and increased intentions to leave the organisation.

The Psychological Contract Theory also holds that there is a close relationship between an organisation's workplace culture and employees' intention to leave. The workplace culture will influence how employees interact with one another every day, the type of leadership behaviour exhibited by supervisors, how fair employees think they are treated by their organisations and whether employees feel respected and valued [41]. Employees expect their workplaces to be supportive, fair and consistent with society's basic expectations, including dignity and respect. When employees believe that their organisations are fulfilling their relational obligations under the psychological contract by providing a work environment that encourages open communication, recognises individual contributions and fosters mutual respect, this contributes to an emotional attachment to the organisation and decreases employees' intention to leave [41].

On the contrary, when an organisation's workplace culture is based on rigid hierarchies, lack of communication between employees and supervisors, favouritism, and lack of recognition for job performance, employees may view this as a violation of their psychological contract and this perception causes a decrease in the employee's level of trust in the organisation's concern for the

employee's well-being. As a result, the employee may become more likely to withdraw and increase the likelihood of their intention to leave [41].

Similarly to the prior example of the relationship between work-family conflict and employee's intention to leave their job, the Psychological Contract Theory can help explain the expected behaviour of an employee within an organisation regarding their domestic and vocational obligations. In the 21st century, an increasing number of modern-day workers are requesting that their employing corporations provide them with support in balancing or merging their work-life and home-life commitments [18]. This request forms part of the employee's psychological contract, particularly in environments where employees experience high levels of work-related stress and/or their family duties are heavy [18].

When an organisation provides an employee with reasonable amounts of work throughout the day, flexible schedules and policies that assist the employee in creating a space between work and family, then the employee is going to feel valued by the organisation due to the fact that the organisation respects their outside obligations. The employee's sense of value will help create less stress and bolstered the employee's loyalty to the company [36]. Nevertheless, if an organisation fails to assist their employees in maintaining that separation, then the employees may perceive a breach of the psychological contract, thus causing an employee to no longer have confidence that an organisation is meeting the employees' needs with care and consideration [36]. An employee's perception of a breach to their psychological contract can lead them to reconsider whether that employee is going to continue their employment relationship with that company and create an increase in their intention to leave the company.

Psychological Contract Theory provides a broad and coherent foundation for the overall research framework outlined previously. It demonstrates the interrelationships between three important components of an employee's environment (career development, work environment, and work-family conflict) and their perceptions of how well their employer has kept its end of the implicit contract. If an employee perceives that their employer has met the employee's expectations in all three of these areas, the employee's psychological contract is reinforced, and that employee will be less likely to leave the organisation. In contrast, when an employee does not perceive that their expectations have been met, perceptions of breach will occur, leading to withdrawal decisions and heightened desire to leave the organisation. Thus, the researchers unanimously agreed that the Psychological Contract Theory is the ideal theoretical basis to ground the conceptual framework proposed as shown in Fig. 1.

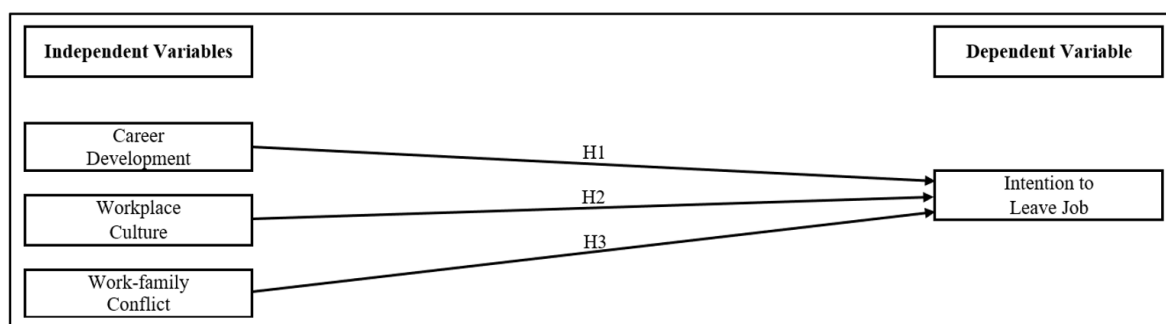


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework

Source: Authors' own work

Based on the earlier discussed literature review complemented with the underpinning theory of Psychological Contract Theory, the researchers have hypothesised that:

H1: Career development has a significant negative relationship with intention to leave job among the doctors and nurses from Guizhou public hospital.

H2: Workplace culture has a significant relationship with intention to leave job among the doctors and nurses from Guizhou public hospital.

H3: Work-family conflict has a significant positive relationship with intention to leave job among the doctors and nurses from Guizhou public hospital.

3. Expected Outcomes

This research will provide a theoretical framework to help explain why health professionals in public hospitals have an intention to leave their job. In providing an integrated framework for the research of health care professional experiences of working in a public hospital, the research can provide a more accurate and comprehensive representation of how they experience their working environment, and how the interplay of multiple pressures can lead them to have an intention to leave. As a result, an integrated approach will allow for clearer theoretical understanding of turnover-related attitudes among health care professionals working in resource-constrained settings, like public hospital in Guizhou, China.

Additionally, one of the intended outcomes of this research is to contribute to the advancement of research related to career development of health care professionals, especially with respect to health care professionals working in the public sector in developing and less economically developed regions such as Guizhou, China [28]. The context of Guizhou, including its institutional environment and socio-economic conditions, will be used to illustrate the ways that structural constraints, such as limited promotion opportunities and variances in training opportunities, have influenced how health care professionals in Guizhou perceive their professional development and future with respect to their profession as a whole [44]. By placing the concepts of career development within the context of Guizhou, this initiative moves research on career development beyond generic conceptions of career development by acknowledging the importance of place-specific conditions in fostering professional job motivation and retention.

It is hoped that this conceptual paper will be extended to empirical work so that the empirical findings can assist healthcare administrators and policy makers to form a better understanding of the underlying causes of an individual's intention to leave an organisation. Besides, this research will help clarify how weaknesses within healthcare organisations relating to career development systems, a lack of motivation in workplace cultures, and the persistence of work–family conflict strengthens each of these areas. Additionally, the identification of interrelated mechanisms will allow for the development of comprehensive and tailored retention policies/programmes rather than short-term or fragmented approaches to retaining health professionals. This finding is important for public hospitals located in Guizhou Province because ineffective use of limited resources can have dire consequences for the delivery of services [48-56].

The long-term outcomes from this research will also significantly support the implementation of China's long-term agenda for healthcare reform and sustainable development. A stable, motivated health workforce will lead to an improvement in the quality of service delivered, patient safety and public health. As such, these improvements support (SDG) 3; good health and well-being, and (SDG) 8; decent work and economic growth that promote sustainable development. Furthermore, by addressing the issues associated with workforce instability in less developed areas, this project will contribute to reducing regional disparities in access to health services, thereby aligning with (SDG) 10; reduced inequalities.

4. Significance of Research

The discussion highlighted in this conceptual paper is important because it provides a connection between the individual experience of health care workers and the greater organisational, economic

and social outcomes of health care. Using a conceptual framework to outline what has been found, helps those in positions of authority (Policymakers and Hospital Administrators) to understand the reasons behind the persistence of intention to leave even though healthcare reform has been ongoing. By giving this understanding, the researchers believe that measures of intervention can go beyond the surface level concurrently address the structures and culture that negatively affect workforce stability in public hospitals extensively and realistically.

One important discovery was that career development should be viewed as a strategic mechanism for retention and not just an ordinary human resource management activity or function. The discussion underscored in the literature review help indicated that providing transparent promotional pathways, equitable access to educational training, and consistent developmental support will enhance the professional identity of the health care provider and will solidify long-term commitment. The research also indicated that because of the economic limitations in the Province of Guizhou, China, there is a need to focus on building human capital through targeted investments sustainable health care development is to be achieved. Enhancing career development systems strengthens retention and simultaneously increases clinical competence and quality of services which supports the overall economic and social development of the region.

In the area of workplace culture, the research's attention is noteworthy as this element of organisations significantly influences the ways in which employees understand fairness, recognition and support. Research evidence that rigid or unsupportive organisational cultures exacerbate employee dissatisfaction and reduce the psychological relationship between employees and the organisation, making them valuable information when promoting organisational culture change in public hospitals. Organisations with cultures that promote communication, respect and recognition, regardless of their material limitations, can improve employee morale and build greater commitment to their organisations.

This conceptual paper also supports that addressing work-family conflict is undoubtedly essential since it is coined as one of the important initiatives for retaining employees as well as fostering loyalty. Long working hours, insufficient staffs, and the absence of work-life balance are usual occurrences in public hospitals not just in China but worldwide. This conceptual paper hence rationalises that work-family conflicts as both an organisational issue and a social issue aligns with employee's loyalty goals. It also stretched to the target of creating decent work and social well-being, indirectly overcoming employees' turnover problems, concurrently create a working environment that fosters family and community health, through the enhancement of the social sustainability of the healthcare system.

The expected impact of this research rise above the healthcare sector. The preservation of workforce stability within public hospitals, which is a focus of this research, contributes to the larger economic development objectives of China by providing a healthier population and a stronger public service system. A strong healthcare institution provides a focal point for attracting investment and productivity therefore, providing a stable employment environment improves the economy. Through this means, this research or conceptual idea initiates support of sustainable development agendas on a national and global scale.

5. Limitation and Recommendation

While this research presents a holistic and theoretically sound framework, it is important to note that it has certain limitations. Since this framework is solely conceptual and does not include actual empirical evidence to validate the relationship between all four variables of interest (career development, workplace culture, work-family conflict, and intention to leave), one cannot statistically establish the relationship between these four variables within this research. Although the framework is derived from established theory and previously conducted research, the limitation of

not being able to support the findings with empirical evidence means that one cannot state that these variables are related to one another with a high degree of confidence.

Another limitation of this research is its focus on public hospitals in Guizhou, which may restrict the ability to generalise the use of the created framework to healthcare systems in other regions. While many of the challenges discussed in the findings of this research are typical of residents of developing countries, different institutional arrangements, cultural and policy differences, and institutional policies will influence the manner in which each of these variables impacts on the relationship. Therefore, when utilising the framework created by this research to assess the management of healthcare systems in other settings, it will be important to make adjustments accordingly.

Given the above observations, it is suggested that further investigation be conducted in a scientific manner to validate the proposed conceptual framework with a quantitative, qualitative or combined approaches. For instance, large sample surveys may be utilised to examine the relationships between variables found in this research, while qualitative studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the health care provider's experiences. Additional research comparing provinces in China also would augment clearer understanding of how local economic conditions impact doctors' and nurses' intent to leave the profession. Finally, this research could verify evidence for policy action and increase potential for application of the Psychological Contract Theory.

Moreover, further application of the Psychological Contract Theory may include incorporating additional factors into the theory, (e.g., different types of leadership, perceptions of organisational justice, and health care reform). As the health care delivery system in China continues to develop, continuing research is required to keep the retention strategies aligned with changing professional and societal expectations.

6. Conclusion

In the nutshell, this research presents a contextualised model of healthcare personnels' intentions to leave their jobs in public hospitals in Guizhou Province, China. This research integrates career development, workplace culture, work–family conflict within one integrated model for research on healthcare workers' attitudes toward their jobs. This research provides insight into understanding how attitudes toward turnover develop among many health-related fields that occur in constrained resource environments. The results demonstrated that healthcare workers do not have one reason for intent to leave, rather they have a combination of factors such as a lack of opportunities for professional growth, a poor organisational culture from senior management, and a lack of work–family balance due to demands from both areas of their lives.

In addition to the findings of this research, the authors also highlight the need to address instantaneously career development systems, the development of an organisational culture that supports career development, and work–family balance, as these items represent not only organisational considerations to improve the stability of the workforce, but they are also fundamental components of delivering sustainable healthcare. When healthcare workers feel valued by their organisation, supported in their careers and able to manage their professional and personal responsibilities, they are more likely to remain committed to their organisation and deliver high-quality services.

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