

## **Understanding Turnover as a Lifecycle Process: The Case of Young Nurses**

### **Saisir la décision de quitter son emploi selon les contextes de vie : le cas de jeunes infirmières**

### **Comprender la rotación de personal desde la perspectiva del curso de vida : el caso de jóvenes enfermeras**

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Résumé de l'article

À partir de l'approche des parcours de vie et de la sociologie de l'individuation, cet article propose d'examiner les processus temporels à l'oeuvre dans la décision de quitter son emploi et le rôle des différents contextes de vie dans l'orientation de ce processus. Une étude qualitative a été menée auprès d'infirmières et d'infirmières auxiliaires afin de comprendre « de l'intérieur », c'est-à-dire à partir de la perspective des acteurs, les raisons motivant autant de jeunes infirmières à vouloir quitter leur emploi.

L'approche théorique retenue insiste sur l'importance de considérer l'interaction entre les différents contextes de vie d'un individu, l'environnement social dans lequel il évolue et les choix professionnels qu'il fait. Des entrevues de type récit de vie ont été menées au cours desquelles les infirmières ont été questionnées sur l'ensemble de leur trajectoire professionnelle et les événements de leur vie professionnelle, personnelle et familiale, qui, de leur point de vue, ont contribué à la décision de quitter leur emploi. Au total, 26 infirmières de moins de 35 ans ont été rencontrées.

L'analyse des données a permis de dégager une typologie des parcours de départ structurée autour de trois principales dimensions : 1- l'aspect temporel des départs (à court ou à long terme); 2- l'évolution de l'expérience subjective de travail; et 3- la phase de la vie professionnelle ou personnelle au moment de la prise de décision. Les résultats démontrent que la décision de quitter se présente comme un processus qui se construit dans un laps de temps plus ou moins long et qui implique différentes dimensions de la vie des infirmières. Ainsi, deux axes de tensions à la source des départs ont été identifiés : 1- les tensions engendrées par un écart entre les attentes de réalisation de soi au travail et la réalité d'emploi; et 2- les tensions provoquées par un emploi qui limite les possibilités de se réaliser dans les autres domaines de la vie.

# Understanding Turnover as a Lifecycle Process: The Case of Young Nurses

Nancy Côté

**Based on the life course perspective and the sociology of individuation, this article aims to examine the temporal processes at work in the decision of nurses to leave their jobs and the role played by different life contexts in guiding this decision. Based on a qualitative approach that sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the reasons why so many young nurses want to leave their jobs, we present four job-leaving pathways that account for the social dimensions involved in the nurses' decision to leave their jobs. The findings reveal that the nurses' decision to leave their jobs represents a complex process that involved various dimensions of their lives, and was closely tied to their quest for self-fulfillment through work and in other spheres of their lives.**

**KEYWORDS:** Employee turnover, nurses and nursing assistants, young workers, relationship with work, life course perspective, sociology of individuation.

## Introduction

In recent years, numerous studies have reported a serious problem of job turnover among nurses in health institutions in several Western countries (Aiken *et al.*, 2001; Estry-Behar *et al.*, 2010; O' Brien-Pallas *et al.*, 2010). In addition to affecting the continuity and quality of services, a high turnover rate is associated with numerous problems within the nursing teams themselves: staff shortages, work overload among permanent employees, disruptions in day-to-day operations, absenteeism, repeated training of new employees, loss of expertise, and so on (Hayes *et al.*, 2011; Singh and Loncar, 2010; Takase, 2010). Given the high direct and indirect costs associated with employee turnover (O'Brien-Pallas *et al.*, 2008) and related problems affecting the entire workforce, the retention of nurses is a major challenge within health institutions.

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The rate of turnover, moreover, appears to be particularly high among new graduate nurses, reaching as high as 60% during the early years of practice (Beecroft *et al.*, 2008; Bowles and Candela, 2005; Cho *et al.*, 2012; Halfer and Graf, 2006). In the province of Quebec, Canada, one study reported that 61.5% of new graduate nurses expressed the intention to leave their current positions (Lavoie-Tremblay *et al.*, 2008). Given the extent of this phenomenon, a growing number of studies have sought to identify the factors explaining turnover among nurses at the start of their careers. Gaining a better understanding of the reasons why so many young nurses want to leave their jobs has become a crucial issue for health institutions, which anticipate massive retirements and a nursing shortage in the coming years (Aiken *et al.*, 2001; O' Brien-Pallas *et al.*, 2003).

In the literature, turnover has mainly been studied using explanatory or predictive models of job leaving through an analysis centred on the psychological dimension of the individual based on variables such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intention to leave (Hayes *et al.*, 2011; Hom and Griffeth, 1995; Takase, 2010). Few studies have examined turnover using a comprehensive approach that grasps the temporal processes at work in the decision to leave one's job and the role played by different life contexts in guiding this process. This is what our study set out to do, based on the case of young nurses.

Our case study, conducted in a health and social services centre, contributes to the literature on turnover by using a theoretical approach that grasped the social complexities involved in the decision to leave one's job. The life course perspective (Elder *et al.*, 2004) and the approach known as the "sociology of individuation" (Martuccelli, 2006) make it possible to consider the relationships between the more general social context, the particular contexts involved in individuals' lives, and the decision to leave one's job. Job leaving is conceptualized as a process that is constructed over time, combining different aspects of individuals' lives and the lives of their significant others.

The first part of this article will identify, based on a review of the literature on turnover among nurses, certain dimensions that require greater attention in the study of this phenomenon. The second section will show why, taken together, the life course perspective and the sociology of individuation, provide a complementary way of understanding employee turnover. The third part of the article will show how our approach can be applied to the study of job turnover by presenting the empirical results of a case study of young nurses who decided to leave their jobs.

## Literature review

Using quantitative methods and survey questionnaires, studies on turnover among nurses have mainly aimed to identify the dimensions of the work environment, organizational factors or individual characteristics affecting work satisfaction,

organizational commitment, or intention to leave, three variables that have been identified in the literature as strong predictors of turnover (Brewer *et al.*, 2012; Hayes *et al.*, 2011; Hom and Griffeth, 1995; Tourangeau and Cranley, 2006).

Among the organizational factors identified, workload is often associated with nursing turnover (Hayes *et al.*, 2011; Takase, 2010). The processes described generally suggest that a heavy workload, which is at the root of many of the problems noted, is associated with a high level of stress, lower job satisfaction and an increased likelihood that nurses will leave their jobs (O'Brien-Pallas *et al.*, 2008). Other studies have found links between job satisfaction and turnover intention and between supervisor and organizational support (Brunetto *et al.*, 2013) and co-worker relationships (Cheng *et al.*, 2013; Tourangeau and Cranley, 2006). A study by O'Brien-Pallas and colleagues (2010) found that higher levels of role ambiguity and role conflict were associated with higher turnover rates. Some scholars have also pointed out the importance of work-family conflict in the intention of nurses to leave their jobs (Rhnima *et al.*, 2014).

Among individual factors, age has been identified in some studies as a significant predictor of turnover, with young nurses being much more mobile in the labour market (Beecroft *et al.*, 2008; Blythe *et al.*, 2008; Tourangeau and Cranley, 2006). Due to the high turnover observed in the early years of practice, researchers have examined the factors explaining turnover among new graduate nurses, mainly focusing on the transition period between nursing studies and entry into the labour market. Indicators of turnover among young nurses have been associated, in particular, with work content, work schedules, effort/reward imbalance and support from colleagues and superiors, as well as career development and patient care issues such as the stress associated with the acuity of patients, unacceptable nurse-patient ratios and unsafe patient care (Beecroft *et al.*, 2008; Bowles and Candela, 2005; Cho *et al.*, 2012; Lavoie-Tremblay *et al.*, 2008; Rhéaume *et al.*, 2011a). Laschinger (2012) also showed that empowerment, work engagement and burnout were significant predictors of turnover among young nurses.

Although they share some challenges related to the work environment, young nurses and older nurses do not express exactly the same sources of dissatisfaction with work. Studies that have adopted a generational approach have highlighted differences in the needs and values of various age groups. For example, Blythe and colleagues (2008) showed that nurses between the ages of 20 and 29 were less satisfied with their work environment and less satisfied with their jobs than older nurses. Compared to those in the oldest age group, nurses in the youngest age group reported higher levels of stress, were more emotionally exhausted, and experienced greater depersonalization. The challenges they raised appeared to be linked to supervision and mentoring, which they deemed to be insufficient,

and to the significant responsibility they had to take on during staff shortages, without adequate preparation. Many young nurses also appear to leave their jobs because they are looking for full-time jobs. Lavoie-Tremblay and colleagues (2010b) also examined the needs and expectations of Generation Y nurses. They brought out the importance for young nurses of stability in the work team, recognition of their own work, proper training, and long-term coaching and feedback. Young nurses also appear to be seeking flexible work schedules that will allow them to pursue other interests.

The numerous studies exploring turnover among nurses have helped identify important elements to consider in the study of this phenomenon. However, the literature has devoted very little attention to the job-leaving process itself, that is, how the intention to leave takes root over time and evolves while taking into account the relations between the multiple variables associated with turnover. As well, to date, researchers have mainly explored the psychological, cognitive, and behavioral components of nurses' decision to leave their jobs (Takase, 2010). There has not been much focus on the social dimensions of this decision, that is, the interaction between individuals and their different life contexts (work, family, social life, etc.).

Moreover, very few studies have sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the reasons for leaving from the perspective of the actors themselves. Most studies have adopted a quantitative approach which, while helping to identify the important elements to consider in studying turnover, do not take into account the actors' rationality or logics of action. Only a few qualitative studies have explored how the work environment affects nurses' subjective work experience and conditions some professional decisions (Cheung, 2004; Choi *et al.*, 2011; Flinkman *et al.*, 2013; McGillis Hall and Kiesners, 2005; Rhéaume *et al.*, 2011b). These studies have shown that the nurses' decision to leave their jobs has involved a complex process entailing multiple organizational, generational and individual factors (Flinkman *et al.*, 2013; Rhéaume *et al.*, 2011b). They highlight the importance of considering the interrelation between work and family life when exploring how nurses experience their work (Cheung, 2004; Flinkman *et al.*, 2013; Lavoie-Tremblay *et al.*, 2010; McGillis Hall and Kiesners, 2005; Rhéaume *et al.*, 2011b). These studies also suggest that the links between the nurses' decision to leave their jobs and the stage at which they find themselves in their work, personal and family lives, as well as their values and expectations regarding work, merit a closer examination in studies on turnover.

For these reasons, it appeared relevant to examine job turnover from another viewpoint in order to enrich our understanding of this phenomenon by adopting an approach that captures, from the actors' perspective, the way the decision of nurses to leave their jobs is constructed over time, while considering the interaction between the numerous spheres of their lives.

## Conceptual framework

The life course perspective (Elder et al., 2004), together with an approach developed by French sociologists known as the “sociology of individuation”<sup>1</sup> (Martuccelli, 2006) provides an innovative way of considering job turnover. Both of these theoretical perspectives seek to identify how individuals “construct themselves” throughout the course of their lives while interacting with the social environments in which they live. The life course perspective proposes an analytical framework based on five analytical principles. First, this perspective involves seeing social phenomena as the result of processes that are constructed over time based on accumulated individual and collective experiences. The stage of life in which individuals find themselves is central to this analysis because it situates realities that are specific to this stage. Second, according to this perspective, life-course patterns unfold in a multiplicity of interconnected realms (studies, family, work, health, etc.) such that changes that occur in one life sphere can have effects in other life spheres. Third, social bonds form throughout our lives that affect our own life course and that of others, meaning that what occurs in the life of a family member can have short- and long-term effects on the direction of one’s own life course. Fourth, a variety of local and national contexts shape life courses, and are shaped by them. Lastly, the fifth principle refers to agency, or the notion that individuals construct their own life course through the decisions and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.

Regarding the sociology of individuation, the notion of “challenges” (*épreuves*), as developed by Martuccelli, is offered as an analytical tool allowing us to link structural processes and personal trajectories in the construction of biographies. These *épreuves* are defined as “historical challenges that are socially produced and unequally distributed, which individuals must confront” (Martuccelli, 2006: 12; trans.; see also C. Wright Mills, 1959). In this sense, work in modern societies<sup>2</sup> is considered to be a challenge that can take on various forms according to one’s social position, work context, and occupation.

From this perspective, the challenge of work takes its meaning from this process of self-construction, a process that individuals engage in throughout their entire lives. Individuals may expect work to give them a strong sense of self-fulfillment. They may seek jobs that will allow them to discover themselves, assert their individuality, and surpass themselves. Work remains a means of earning a living and of social integration, but it is also becoming much more than this in many individuals’ subjective experience. However, work is not the only sphere for self-construction. The importance attributed to work in an individual’s self-definition must be put in perspective in relation to the other social spaces in which life unfolds, including family and the various social networks to which one belongs, which all contribute to the construction of identity. Decisions about

work are thus part of a much broader quest for identity involving all the spheres of one's life.

The notion of challenges in Martuccelli's work leads to a focus on how nurses experience the way their values and expectations regarding work and other spheres of life are juxtaposed with the concrete realities of work, and how this shapes their self-construction. The life course perspective, for its part, leads us to consider how this juxtaposition evolves, taking into account the different life stages and the events that occur at work and in one's personal life. These two perspectives, taken together, make it possible to examine the nurses' decision to leave their jobs in relation to their work context (a source of both opportunities and constraints), the resources they have at their disposal, and their personal situation, which may need to be adjusted more or less significantly to the job. Thus, the decision to leave their jobs is conceptualized as a process that is constructed over time and involves a variety of interrelated elements.

### **A case study of young nurses**

Based on these theoretical perspectives, we undertook a case study in a health and social services centre (CSSS) in the province of Québec, Canada,<sup>3</sup> with a particularly high turnover rate among young nurses and nursing assistants.<sup>4</sup> CSSSs coordinate and provide primary care to the population living within a given territory. A qualitative approach was used to gain a better understanding of how the nurses arrived at the decision to leave their jobs. We conducted life-narrative interviews lasting between two-and-a-half and three hours each. Life-narrative interviews are considered to be particularly suitable for capturing processes, that is, the sequence of situations, interactions, and actions, and the most appropriate approach for grasping the linkage between the different life spheres (Bertaux and Delacroix, 2000). This method is also particularly useful for capturing the entire self-construction process that individuals in contemporary societies must undergo (Martuccelli, 2006).

All the interviews were conducted by the author of this article. In order to encourage the participants to enter into a narrative mode, the interviews began with an open question.<sup>5</sup> Sub-questions were asked if the participants did not spontaneously address certain aspects of their experience. Although the case study was conducted in a single institution, the nurses were asked about their entire job trajectory. This made it possible to determine how their experience in this CSSS fit into their job trajectory and to better understand their expectations regarding this new job in relation to their previous work experience and future plans. They were also asked about their specific experience in the CSSS, in particular, why they chose to work in this institution, when, exactly, they began to think about leaving the organization and why they actually did so. The nurses

were also asked to identify any events in their work lives and personal lives or in the lives of people close to them that may have influenced their decision.

All nurses who left this CSSS between 2005 and 2009 received a letter from the human resources department informing them of the goals of the study and the modes of participation. The researcher then followed up by telephone, ultimately recruiting 26 nurses and nursing assistants based on a set of selection criteria. First, our study focused on nurses under the age of 35, an age group in which the turnover rate is particularly high. Participants also had to have left their jobs voluntarily and have less than five years' seniority, representing the period of time in which the majority of job leaving occurred.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in recruiting the participants, a diversity of situations was sought with respect to job position, education level, number of years of seniority, and conjugal and family situation.

**TABLE 1**  
**Profile of participants**

<b>Age</b>	25-29	13
	30-35	13
<b>Job title</b>	Nurses	21
	Nursing assistants	5
<b>Education</b>	Vocational diploma	5
	Technical college diploma	3
	Bachelor's degree	13
	Master's degree	5
<b>Duration in the job</b>	Less than 6 months	6
	Between 6 and 11 months	3
	Between 1 and 3 years	11
	More than 3 years	6
<b>Job status</b>	Full-time job	8
	Part-time job	6
	Filling in for someone	7
	On call	5
<b>How the job in this CSSS fit into their job trajectory</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> job	6
	2 <sup>nd</sup> job	10
	3 <sup>rd</sup> job	7
	4 <sup>th</sup> job and up	3
<b>Number of children</b>	0	13
	Pregnant with 1 <sup>st</sup> child	2
	1-2	9
	3 +	2
<b>Conjugal situation</b>	In a couple relationship	22
	Single	4



All the interviews were recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. Performing a comprehensive analysis involves entering into the individuals' world in order to gain an understanding "from within" that will reveal the actors' rationality and logics of action and bring out the social processes at play (Bertaux and Delacroix, 2000). To this end, we conducted a typological analysis based on the aggregation procedure by clustering cases around core units (Coenen-Huther, 2006; Grémy and Le Moan, 1977). The first step, which consisted in condensing the data, involved writing up a comprehensive summary of each case and chronologically reconstructing the nurses' job trajectories in order to bring out the chain of events that led to their decision to leave their jobs. Using NVivo software, each verbatim transcript was then coded using a grid based on the interview guide and new elements that emerged during the interviews. The second step, which involved clustering the cases, led to a classification on the basis of their similarities and differences, while making sure that all cases were classified (completeness requirement) and that each case belonged to only one group (exclusivity requirement). This analysis brought out an empirical typology of the nurses' job-leaving pathways, structured on the basis of three dimensions that proved to be highly significant in the analysis: 1- the temporal aspects of the job-leaving pathways (short or long term); 2- the nurses' subjective work experience; and 3- the stage in the nurses' work lives or personal lives in which they found themselves when they made the decision. During the various steps of the analysis, the results were validated by a steering committee made up of researchers, decision-makers, union representatives and nurses who were involved throughout the entire length of the research project.

## Findings

### Pathway 1: Unmet expectations

The six nurses in this pathway felt that there was a significant gap between their job expectations and the concrete realities of their work. The decision to leave was typically made quite quickly, usually within 6 months after being hired. Numerous sources of dissatisfaction were identified and involved both job content and working conditions. Some nurses referred to a lack of supervision and support at the start of their jobs. This situation posed a serious challenge, even for nurses for whom this was not their first job, and caused many of them to feel incompetent and to doubt their ability to practice the profession and become *good nurses*. Moreover, several of the nurses in this pathway had to deal with erratic work schedules and an uncertain number of hours from week to week. The nature of the work itself was also a source of dissatisfaction. Some nurses were dissatisfied with the fact that they could

not work with the clientele of their choice.<sup>7</sup> Many emphasized that their heavy workload prevented them from providing the kind of care that was consistent with their professional values. They had to work quickly and in different teams and thus, in their view, were forced to neglect some aspects of patient care. Another source of dissatisfaction was that the job they held did not allow them to make full use of their skills or exercise professional autonomy within their multidisciplinary workteam.

It was rare that the nurses left for just one reason. Rather, their narratives spoke of a subjective experience marked by several sources of dissatisfaction that built on one another and led them fairly quickly to want to find another job, as explained by Magalie.

I liked the patients. [...] but when you're just filling in for other nurses, you don't know how they usually do things. The patients aren't happy because you don't do things the same way the other nurses do. I should mention that maybe I wasn't in a good team. Maybe if I had had a better team, I wouldn't have made the same decision, but I had a hard time with that. And, we weren't offered much in the way of hours. I only had a part-time job and I had to fill in my hours by working in a standby team, so I had to work both days and nights! [...] Sometimes I worked alone at night in a department that was spread over two floors. [...] I was filling in for other nurses and I'd never been there before. But I was still supposed to be in charge.

*Magalie, 29 years old, first job*

When they arrived at the CSSS, the nurses who fit into this pathway were in a period of transition in their work lives, for example, at the end of their studies or at the point of transition from initial to advanced training, or had recently experienced some form of upheaval in their personal lives such as a health problem. The decision to leave was thus part of a quest or exploration of the labour market and was consistent with a logic of "finding their place". These nurses were looking for a job that suited them, in which they could self-realize professionally.

## **Pathway 2: Self-fulfillment in other spheres of their lives**

This pathway included nurses who, after a few years with the CSSS, had reached a different stage in their personal lives and had different work-related needs. These nurses liked their jobs, which explains why they left over the longer rather than the shorter term. They decided to leave their jobs because the organization could not respond to their changing work-related needs. Two different groups were identified: 1- Those who sought working conditions that would allow them to better achieve their personal or family-related goals; and 2- those who had to reconcile work with changes that had taken place in their family lives.

### The desire for stability

The five nurses in this sub-group were well aware of the working conditions prevailing in the organization. They were willing to make compromises when they were starting out in order to carve out a place for themselves within the organization, but nevertheless expected their situation to improve over time. The challenges they faced were mainly related to the precariousness and unpredictability associated with scheduling, which sometimes forced them to take on several different contracts at the same time, often in different institutions. Time management thus became a real challenge for them. Thus, at this stage in their work lives, work took up a great deal of space and left little room for the other dimensions of their lives, something they had been willing to accept, but only for a while. Over time, the situation became more difficult to live with for several reasons. First, they found it difficult to continually keep up this work pace; after a while, they “ran out of steam” and began to feel worn down and even burned out. Moreover, they began to feel pessimistic about the chances that their situation would improve within a time frame that was acceptable to them.

Lastly, the key factor in these nurses’ decision to leave their jobs appeared to be the lack of stability of their situation, which impeded their self-fulfillment in other spheres of their lives. After a few years in the labour market, they had reached a stage in their lives when they wanted to limit the space taken up by work in their lives and invest in other projects. They wanted to pursue their studies,<sup>8</sup> have a social life, focus on their couple relationship, or have a family.

I was working 276 days a year, with my two jobs combined. Sometimes, I worked both the day shift and evening shift on the same day. I was working almost every weekend. It was getting really awful. [...] So, you know, I said, “Okay, that’s enough. The first place that offers me something reasonable that’ll improve my quality of life, well, I’ll take it”. I thought about it for a long time because I really liked that job. I liked it but there was another side to it. How long would I have had to stay on the recall list? Maybe six months, maybe a year, maybe even four or five years, I don’t know. We had a house, we wanted to have kids and, you know, go on vacation sometimes.

*Sandrine, 27 years old, third job*

The decision made by these nurses was thus consistent with a logic of stabilization. They were willing to leave a job they liked for a more stable, although, in some cases, slightly less interesting job that would make it easier for them to self-realize through other spheres of their lives.

### The quest for work-family balance

The two nurses in this sub-group had achieved a degree of work-family balance until a change occurred in their family lives requiring an adjustment in the

jobs they held. In contrast with the previous case, for this group the issue was not job stability, but rather the linkage between the world of work and that of the family in a changing context. Having reached a different stage in their family lives, with the specific accompanying demands and realities, these nurses had to re-examine some choices in accordance with their priorities and those of their life partners at this time in their lives, as explained by Maryse.

It was a good arrangement to work evenings when the kids were young. [But when my son started school,] I decided to look for a day job because I no longer saw my son or my partner. It was a choice I made for our family life. [...]

*Maryse, 32 years old, third job*

Nevertheless, this decision, which Maryse made for the good of her family, was agonizing. As she explained, "I can't believe I had to quit a job I liked so much." She left a permanent evening position that she adored and that came with stability, benefits, and seniority, for a day job where she had to "start from scratch", but which nevertheless allowed her to invest in her family life. The decision to leave was thus consistent with a logic of "work-family balance".

### **Pathway 3: Self-construction through professional development**

This group was made up of four nurses who wished to grow professionally by taking up new challenges and making the best use of their knowledge, and discover other facets of themselves. The desire to leave their jobs also occurred over the longer term and was usually brought on by events such as the completion of a university program marking a new stage in their career path. They had wanted to stay within the organization but when they were ready for a change, no possibilities seemed to be available. The decision to leave was consistent with a logic of self-construction through professional development, as explained by Gabrielle, who had recently received her Master's degree:

[I said] I'm ready for more of a challenge. I'd be able to evaluate patients, like the care counsellor nurse. [...] I could do development, I could do research. Have you got anything for me? She answered, "I really haven't got anything to offer you".

*Gabrielle, 29 years old, second job*

Gabrielle's decision to leave must, however, be examined in light of her experience in her first job, which was a crucial factor in the direction her job trajectory took. At the hospital where she was working, her heavy workload prevented her from providing the kind of care that she considered to be quality care. She often felt that she was neglecting her patients, which was a very difficult experience for her. Moreover, despite her university training, she felt that she was seen as someone who merely carried out orders within her multidisciplinary team. This is what made her decide to pursue her Master's studies as a strategy to move

away from direct patient care, a major source of discomfort for her, and become eligible for positions in which she hoped to be able to exercise more professional autonomy. She arrived at the CSSS with these professional aspirations, which then guided her subsequent career decisions.

#### **Pathway 4: Responding to an unforeseen event**

For the nine nurses in this pathway, the decision to leave was caused by a sudden and unexpected triggering event that occurred in their work lives or personal lives at various points in their job trajectories. Different types of events were identified in the nurses' narratives, and generated different logics of action—the same as those identified in pathways 1, 2 and 3—depending on the nature of the event.

The trigger sometimes took the form of an unexpected job offer that better matched the nurse's interests and career plans (logic of professional development) or a health problem that forced the nurses to reduce their work pace (logic of stabilization). This latter situation arose mainly for those who did not yet have a stable job and who were combining contracts in different institutions, as was the case for Laurie. Having to choose between a *dream job* and a stable job, she chose the latter. The fact that she had sole responsibility for her financial obligations, having no spouse with whom to share expenses or on whom she could count if she lacked work, swung the balance in favour of the stable job.

Other triggers were related to the numerous changes that had taken place in the organization. These organizational changes led to a significant deterioration in working conditions for some nurses, especially those in a more vulnerable position, that is, whose job situation was not yet stable and who often also had family responsibilities. These numerous changes penalized some nurses who found themselves with a reduced number of working hours or a work schedule that was incompatible with their family responsibilities. Those who could not count on a partner or support network in the case of a scheduling conflict mentioned that they had very little leeway to adjust to these changes. The decision to leave their jobs meant that they had to start over again, "seeking their place" in the world of work, consistent with the logic of action mobilized in the first pathway.

## **Discussion**

### **Coping with the challenges of nursing**

Based on the work of Martuccelli (2006), our analysis brought out two sources of tension underlying the young nurses' decision to leave their jobs: 1- a gap between their expectations regarding the possibilities for self-realization in their

jobs and the concrete realities of work; and 2- a job situation that limited the possibilities to self-realize in other spheres of their lives. In some pathways (1, 3), the challenges presented by the nurses' jobs related to working conditions that did not allow for the degree of self-construction or self-realization at work sought by these young nurses, who expressed two types of aspirations: "vocational" aspirations, related to care work and the care relationship, and "professional" aspirations, related to the development and mobilization of skills, professional autonomy and career advancement. In striving to find their place in the labour market or opportunities for professional development, they were primarily seeking self-realization through their work. In the vast majority of cases, the decision to leave their jobs did not stem from a lack of interest in the profession—quite the contrary. This decision reflected the importance that work held for them in the process of self-construction and their strong desire to find a job that would be closer to their professional ideals. These results are consistent with those of other studies showing that, despite high job mobility, young nurses demonstrate a high level of career commitment (Blythe *et al.*, 2008) and only a small proportion of new graduate nurses intend to leave the profession (Lavoie-Tremblay *et al.*, 2008).

In the other pathways (2, and some cases in 4), the challenges presented by the nurses' jobs related to job precariousness, unpredictable working hours and non-standard work schedules, which limited their opportunities for self-realization in other spheres of their lives. Besides spilling over into their personal and family lives and, in some cases, affecting their health, the jobs the young nurses held did not provide them with a secure and stable basis on which to construct other life plans, or else, over time, became incompatible with their family responsibilities. Their desire for stability or the quest for work-family balance reflected a desire to gain a degree of "identity coherence" (Simmel, 1950), that is, they were seeking the opportunity for self-realization through many dimensions of their lives. The decision to leave their jobs thus represented an attempt to reduce the identity-based tension caused by the contradictory requirements of the world of work and the various social spaces in their lives. This decision also demonstrated that work had become less central to their identity. Work remained important but other dimensions of their lives were also gaining in importance, a finding confirmed by other studies involving young workers (Méda and Vendramin, 2013; Mercure and Vultur, 2010). Work clearly constituted only one part of a much broader life plan for these young nurses, who valued work-life balance (Lavoie-Tremblay *et al.*, 2010; Takase *et al.*, 2009) and may have decided to leave their jobs when work began to spill over into their personal lives (Rhéaume *et al.*, 2011b). However, this was sometimes an agonizing decision to make, as expressed by some participants who reported experiencing real identity-based tension between a job they loved and a family life in which they also wished to invest.

The challenges faced by these young nurses refer to some structural dimensions of a profession that was constructed on the basis of feminine and religious identities (Cohen, 2012). This profession is imbued with a “vocational” relationship with work, entailing the values of devotion, self-sacrifice and compassion. It lies within a tradition of hierarchical interprofessional relationships wherein the medical authorities historically played an important role in defining and controlling the professional autonomy of nurses. It is characterized by high availability requirements which are conducive to work spilling over into other aspects of nurses’ daily lives.

These challenges also refer to broader changes in the labour market which have had an impact on working conditions in the Quebec health and social services network. The adoption of *New Public Management*, based on the principles of effectiveness, efficiency and economy, has led institutions in the health system to seek greater organizational flexibility (O’Flynn, 2007). These work-related structural constraints have had a particular effect on nurses at the start of their careers, who bear most of the brunt of the search for organizational flexibility through recourse to precarious contracts and work schedules that are adapted to the fluctuating needs of work teams (Dubois and Dussault, 2002). The impact of these working conditions is even greater for nurses with children. For these nurses, the availability and flexibility requirements of work are compounded by family responsibilities, which, moreover, can be particularly demanding and unpredictable when their children are young. Nurses who cannot rely on a social network to help ease the tension between their work lives and family lives become even more vulnerable when they are faced with changes in their work lives or personal lives. Young nurses are thus at a stage in their lives in which they are constructing several different life plans simultaneously, each with its own set of requirements and a degree of instability and unpredictability, making work-family balance even more of a challenge.

In a context where job opportunities are numerous, young nurses respond to these challenges at work by choosing to leave their jobs so as to limit the impact of these structural constraints on their work lives and personal lives and improve their work situation more quickly. By leaving their jobs, these nurses are also expressing a view of the profession which asserts the importance of vocational values related to care work, professional values related to the development and mobilization of skills, and the personal value of work-life balance. Moreover, their decision to leave, in great numbers, is exerting pressure on workplaces to give greater consideration to the needs and aspirations of young nurses.

## Conclusion

Our results show that the young nurses' decision to leave their jobs was the result of a complex process involving a set of factors related both to their work experience and to an interwoven set of personal, family and social experiences. In addition to the psychological components identified in the literature, it is also important to consider the social processes involved, which bring out the dynamics at play between structural constraints, the cumulative effect of different life contexts and the human agency involved in the decision to leave one's job.

Our analysis of the young nurses' narratives brought out job-leaving processes that mobilized different logics of action and involved three distinct timeframes. In some cases, the decision to leave was made in the short term, in other cases, it was constructed over the longer term, and in others, it was made at various times in the nurses' job trajectories. In cases where the decision to leave was made quickly, this decision resulted from several sources of dissatisfaction, reflecting the fact that entering the profession and transitioning from one job to another can be a difficult experience if the workplace does not provide working conditions that are conducive to self-realization at work. This finding confirms the results of several studies examining the organizational factors of turnover (Hayes *et al.*, 2011). In cases where the decision to leave was made over the long term, it was made in response to the young nurses' changing needs with regard to work, in relation to developments in their personal, family or work lives. This is in line with a longitudinal study by Beecroft and colleagues (2008) which brought out differences among new graduate nurses, showing that older new graduate nurses were more likely to show turnover intent if they did not get their ward choice. In cases where the decision to leave was made following an unexpected event, this decision was often prompted by organizational changes that led to a deterioration in the job situation of some young nurses holding precarious positions within this institution. Indeed, the impact of the numerous changes that have been implemented in the health and social services network, which have increased the precariousness of the nursing workforce, has been documented in the literature (Dubois and Dussault, 2002). Our results thus show that the impact of the determinants of turnover identified in previous studies depends on the stage in the nurses' work, personal and family lives in which they find themselves.

Thus, measures to improve nurses' retention can be developed to respond to these three timeframes. In the short term, organizations would do well to develop measures that act on several sources of dissatisfaction simultaneously, such as making work teams more stable, which would allow for better supervision and support when nurses are starting out in their jobs, and would thus foster the development of a sense of competence and facilitate the management of work schedules. With regard to cases where the decision to leave was made over the long



term, organizations would benefit from developing flexible management strategies that allow nurses to grow within the organization, according to the different stages in their personal lives or work lives in which they find themselves. Moreover, one of the challenges concerned the difficulty of limiting the degree to which work spilled over into the nurses' personal lives. These challenges could be greatly mitigated by favouring considerably more stable and predictable work schedules and greater employment stability in general. Lastly, organizations would also do well to focus on the consequences of the organizational changes they have imposed on the nurses who hold the most precarious positions within these organizations.

## Notes

- 1 For a presentation in English of the main ideas put forward by Martuccelli, see the interview conducted by Setton and Sposito (2013).
- 2 In the current period, work is characterized by greater precariousness in the employment relationship and greater flexibility in work trajectories (Beck, 1992). The formerly dominant model of stable life-long employment, on which individual career plans and the rights and protections of workers were based, have gradually weakened and given way to a model in which the responsibility for constructing one's own work trajectory now lies with the individual, with all the risks that this involves.
- 3 The results presented in this article concern both nurses and nursing assistants. However, since we do not present separate results for each group, for ease of reading, we will use the term nurses to refer to both groups.
- 4 Nurses and nursing assistants come under the same job category in health institutions in Quebec.
- 5 Can you tell me how your work life has unfolded, starting with why you chose to become a nurse?
- 6 A quantitative analysis of the administrative files showed that 94% of nurses under the age of 35 who left their jobs between April 2005 and March 2009 did so within their first five years on the job.
- 7 Since nursing shortages are more severe in long-term care, it is not uncommon for nurses to be sent to this sector.
- 8 Balancing work and studies is a serious issue in the career paths of nurses. In Quebec, it is very common for college-trained nurses to pursue university-level studies while working part- or even full-time for an institution in the health network.

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## SUMMARY

### Understanding Turnover as a Lifecycle Process: The Case of Young Nurses

Based on the life course perspective and the sociology of individuation, this article aims to examine the temporal processes at work in the decision of nurses to leave their jobs and the role played by different life contexts in guiding this decision. A qualitative study was conducted with nurses in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the reasons why so many young nurses decide to leave their jobs.

The theoretical perspective used focuses on the importance of considering the interaction between the different spheres of a person's life, the social environment in which they live and the work-related decisions they make. We conducted life-narrative interviews during which the nurses were asked about their overall work trajectory and the events in their work, personal, family, and social lives which, in their opinion, contributed to their decision to leave their jobs. A total of 26 nurses under the age of 35 were interviewed. The data analysis helped to identify several job-leaving pathways structured around three main dimensions: 1- the temporal aspects of the job-leaving pathways (short or long term); 2- the nurses' subjective work experience; and 3- the stage in the nurses' work lives or personal lives in which they found themselves when they made the decision.

The findings reveal that the nurses' decision to leave their jobs represents a complex process that developed over a short or longer period of time and involved various dimensions of their lives. Our analysis brought out two sources of tension underlying the nurses' decision to leave their jobs: 1- a gap between their expectations regarding the possibilities for self-realization in their jobs and the concrete realities of work; and 2- a job situation that limited the possibilities to self-realize in other spheres of their lives.

**KEYWORDS:** Employee turnover, nurses and nursing assistants, young workers, relationship with work, life course perspective, sociology of individuation.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Saisir la décision de quitter son emploi selon les contextes de vie : le cas de jeunes infirmières

À partir de l'approche des parcours de vie et de la sociologie de l'individuation, cet article propose d'examiner les processus temporels à l'œuvre dans la décision de quitter son emploi et le rôle des différents contextes de vie dans l'orientation de ce processus. Une étude qualitative a été menée auprès d'infirmières et d'infirmières auxiliaires afin de comprendre « de l'intérieur », c'est-à-dire à partir de la perspective des acteurs, les raisons motivant autant de jeunes infirmières à vouloir quitter leur emploi.

L'approche théorique retenue insiste sur l'importance de considérer l'interaction entre les différents contextes de vie d'un individu, l'environnement social dans lequel il évolue et les choix professionnels qu'il fait. Des entrevues de type récit de vie ont été menées au cours desquelles les infirmières ont été questionnées sur l'ensemble de leur trajectoire professionnelle et les événements de leur vie professionnelle, personnelle et familiale, qui, de leur point de vue, ont contribué à la décision de quitter leur emploi. Au total, 26 infirmières de moins de 35 ans ont été rencontrées.

L'analyse des données a permis de dégager une typologie des parcours de départ structurée autour de trois principales dimensions : 1- l'aspect temporel des départs (à court ou à long terme); 2- l'évolution de l'expérience subjective de travail; et 3- la phase de la vie professionnelle ou personnelle au moment de la prise de décision. Les résultats démontrent que la décision de quitter se présente comme un processus qui se construit dans un laps de temps plus ou moins long et qui implique différentes dimensions de la vie des infirmières. Ainsi, deux axes de tensions à la source des départs ont été identifiés : 1- les tensions engendrées par un écart entre les attentes de réalisation de soi au travail et la réalité d'emploi; et 2- les tensions provoquées par un emploi qui limite les possibilités de se réaliser dans les autres domaines de la vie.

MOTS-CLÉS : Roulement de personnel, infirmières et infirmières auxiliaires, rapport au travail, parcours de vie, sociologie de l'individuation.

## RESUMEN

### Comprender la rotación de personal desde la perspectiva del curso de vida: el caso de jóvenes enfermeras

Basándose en la perspectiva del curso de vida y en la sociología de la individuación, este artículo se propone examinar los procesos que influyen la decisión de las enfermeras de dejar sus empleos y el rol que juegan diferentes contextos de vida en dicha decisión. Se efectuó para ello un estudio cualitativo implicando enfermeras y enfermeras auxiliares de manera a obtener una comprensión pro-

funda de las razones por las cuales tantas jóvenes enfermeras deciden de dejar sus empleos.

La perspectiva teórica adoptada focaliza sobre la importancia de considerar la interacción entre las diferentes esferas de vida de las personas, el contexto social en el cual viven y las decisiones que ellas adoptan respecto al trabajo. Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas de tipo narración de vida durante las cuales las enfermeras se expresaron sobre sus trayectorias de trabajo y sobre los acontecimientos de la vida profesional, personal, familiar y social que, en su opinión, contribuyeron a la decisión de dejar el empleo. Un total de 26 enfermeras de menos de 35 años fueron entrevistadas. El análisis de los datos permitió identificar varias configuraciones de abandono de empleo estructuradas en torno a tres dimensiones: 1- los aspectos temporales del abandono de empleo (de corto o largo plazo); 2- la experiencia subjetiva de trabajo de las enfermeras; y 3- la etapa en la vida de trabajo o en la vida personal de las enfermeras que, según ellas mismas, influyó su decisión de dejar el empleo.

Los resultados revelan que la decisión de las enfermeras de dejar el empleo representa un proceso complejo que se desarrolla en un corto o largo periodo de tiempo y que implica varias dimensiones de sus vidas. Nuestro análisis hizo resaltar dos fuentes de tensión subyacentes en la decisión de las enfermeras de dejar su empleo: 1- una brecha entre sus expectativas respecto a las posibilidades de realización en su trabajo y la realidad concreta del trabajo; y 2- una situación de empleo que limita las posibilidades de auto-realización en otras esferas de sus vidas.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Rotación de empleados, enfermeras y enfermeras asistentes, trabajadores jóvenes, relación al trabajo, perspectiva de curso de vida, sociología de individuación.