What if Social Workers are Paid More?

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Abstract

Governments around the world are increasingly worried about widening income inequalities and the stagnation of low-skilled wages. Social Workers are the frontline staff providing financial as well as other social services to low income households. The effectiveness of national and agency-based programs to the poor depends heavily on the discretionary help given by such front line staff. Using Singapore as a case study, this article reflects on the question what if Social Workers are paid more. The Compensating Wage Differential model in Labor Economics explains low salaries and high turnover of Social Workers. Comparison of two small surveys with a past research and nationally reported wages shows that Social Work salaries in Singapore are low compared to other occupations and countries. Implications of the study include government intervention to increase relative wages of Social Workers and specifications for future empirical research.

Keywords: Social Work, Salary, Singapore, economic theory

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

January 20, 2007, was the inaugural celebration of Social Workers' Day in Singapore. But one headline in the local newspaper that day was hardly celebratory. Titled "Social Work: Great Job, Pity about the Pay", the article quoted several Social Workers who spoke about the low pay and punishing hours (Tan, 2007, January 20). One veteran Social Worker with 15 years of experience earned less than S$5,000 (US$3,318) a month and shared how she herself was bordering on break down. A former Social Worker was earning only S$2,200 (US$1,460) after four years and left for an insurance job that earned her S$3,000 (US$1,991) a month. The article went on to discuss the challenges to social services as a result of low pay and demanding workload, including high turnover of staff that leads to poor quality services and long waits for clients.

Are Social Workers really underpaid? In a commissioned study to take a "first look" at the Social Work labor market in the United States, Barth (2003) summarized, "I found virtually no literature on the Social Work labor market as a whole, and no data…." (p. 9). Using scant data from the Current Population Studies, he found that Social Workers earn 11% less than other professionals after adjusting for other factors. He concluded that Social Work salaries are depressed by three factors: two supply-side and one demand-side. On the supply side, salaries are held low by firstly, Social Work positions being filled by non-Social Workers; and secondly, Social Workers' attitude of self-sacrifice. "For Social Workers, mission trumps money," he says (p. 14). On the demand side, even if there is excess demand for the services of Social Workers, the demand for Social Workers is unresponsive to low salaries because budgeting for social services is constrained by the social and political climate and by low funds.

The aim of this paper is to understand the reasons and consequences of low Social Work pay. First, it applies a theoretical model to explain low salary and high turnover among Social Workers. Second, it uses Singapore as a case study to establish that Social Workers are underpaid, and to showcase the efforts made to improve Social Workers' salary and work conditions. Salary levels of Social Workers in Singapore from national data and two small surveys are compared with

those of other professions and other countries. Third, it brings together the theoretical and empirical discussions to argue why and how policy makers and agencies should intervene to raise Social Workers' pay.

Literature on Turnover, Job Satisfaction and Burnout

Besides the above study by Barth (2003), no other scholarly literature on the Social Work labor market has focused on salary. Salary may be included as a predictor of other work place outcomes, namely job dissatisfaction, burnout, and turnover, but it has not been a key factor of concern. The empirical findings on the effect of salary on these outcomes have been mixed. In terms of turnover, Jayaratne and Chess (1983) found significant associations between financial rewards and turnover among female Social Work administrators, but not male. For males, promotion instead was a significant predictor of turnover. Jayaratne and Chess (1984) found significance of only financial rewards (and not other factors) to turnover of community and child welfare workers, but financial rewards had no significant effects on the turnover of family service workers. While the study on child welfare workers by Dickinson and Perry (2002) found that salary had a positive impact on turnover, Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaratne and Chess (1994) found no significance on turnover from either actual or perceived income among Social Workers.

In terms of job satisfaction, while Barber (1986) found that salary was significantly associated with job satisfaction, many other studies (e.g. Jayaratne & Chess, 1983, on Social Work administrators; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984, on child welfare, family, and community workers; Evans et al. , 2006, on mental health Social Workers in England and Wales; Poulin, 1994, on members of the National Association of Social Workers and the Gerontological Society of America) did not find so. Similarly, for studies on burnout, an early study by Jackson, Schwab and Schuler (1986) found that financial rewards is correlated with a reduction in the personal accomplishment subscale of Maslach's burnout inventory. However, later studies either found insignificant correlations between salary and burnout (e.g. Collings & Murray, 1996, on Social Workers in Northern England; Glasberg,

Eriksson & Norberg, 2007, on healthcare professionals in Sweden; Tam & Mong, 2005, on School Social Workers in Hong Kong; Lee & Ghoh, 2002, on Social Workers in Singapore) or did not include salary at all (e.g. Benzur & Michael, 2007, on Social Workers, Nurses, and Psychologists; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006, on child protection workers; Schwartz, Tiamiyu & Dwyer, 2007, on clinical Social Workers).

Despite such mixed results from salary, review articles continue to articulate that remuneration matters, although in weak terms. A systematic review on mental health Social Workers by Coyle, Edwards, Hannigan, Fothergill and Burnard (2005) stated that "extrinsic motivators such as factors of remuneration appeared to be relevant as being contributory stressors" (p.6). In a systematic review by Zlotnik, Depanfilis and Lane (2005) on retention of child welfare staff, only six of the twenty-five articles reviewed found salary as a significant factor, but the authors concluded that salary was an important organizational factor that needs to be addressed. In a qualitative study of mental health Social Workers in the United Kingdom by Huxley et al. (2005), respondents listed treatment by employers as one of the most unsatisfactory aspects of their jobs. Although respondents did not voice pay as a prominent factor in treatment by employers, the authors opined that respondents might have been dissatisfied with employers' recognition because they were comparing with the pay, training, and promotion of other health professionals. Therefore, despite mixed empirical results, there seems to be a reluctance to totally discount salary, yet a lack of further investigation as to whether and how salary matters.

One reason for the above inconsistent results of salary on turnover, job satisfaction, and burnout might be the lack of a clear theory of the effects of salary, leading to wrong empirical specifications. Siebert (2005) suggested that burnout remains a poorly defined construct because measures tend to have formed the theory, rather than theory informing the design of the measures. She also went on to say that "many studies reported correlates of burnout that were as ambiguously defined as the main concept of burnout" (p. 27). Indeed, while most burnout studies measured burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), a huge variety of

factors have been considered. Examples include stress of conscience (Glasberg et al., 2007), and compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Siebert herself highlighted a lack of theoretical clarity in order to justify her examination of personal factors, which included family stressors such as divorce and caregiving for a sick family member, and personal characteristics such as being a perfectionist and high achiever. Meanwhile, although the MBI was developed and refined in the 1970s and 1980s, Maslach and Leiter (1997) offered a theory of what causes burnout only in 1997 in a book titled "The Truth about Burnout". Maslach's theory is that burnout is caused by six mismatches between people and their jobs, namely work overload, lack of control, breakdown in community, absence of fairness, conflicting values, and insufficient reward. Obviously, the focus in these six mismatches has a very different orientation from other factors such as those cited earlier, and there is no clear theoretical link between the factors in the other studies and the MBI. Furthermore, while insufficient reward (i.e. salary) is one of the factors in Maslach's theory, as asserted earlier, some burnout studies did not include salary.

Most studies on job satisfaction measured it using a global likert scale to the question "overall, how satisfied are you with your job?". However, the theoretical origins seem different. Barber (1986) followed the theory of work motivation by Herzberg (1959), where intrinsic factors lead to job satisfaction and extrinsic factors lead to job dissatisfaction. Salary is among the top six extrinsic factors in Herzberg, and Barber found that it significantly predicted job satisfation.

Lee and Ghoh (2002) followed the Job Characteristic Model by Hackman and Oldham (1980), where five job characteristics – skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback from job – are all important to higher work motivation, effectiveness, and satisfaction. Lee and Ghoh followed the five characteristics rather closely, but also added control variables, including salary. They found that salary was insignificantly related to job satisfaction, and this may not be surprising as salary may not fall in the domain of Hackman and Oldham's model.

Many studies examined burnout, job satisfaction, and job retention together. For example, Jayaratne and Chess (1983) and Vinokur-Kaplan et al. (1994) studied turnover together with job

satisfaction; Evans et al. (2006) and Acker (1999) studied burnout with job satisfaction; and Jayaratne and Chess (1984) studied all three together. Jayaratne and Chess (1983, 1984) used the same empirical specification, which followed seven job facets in the University of Michigan Quality of Employment Survey (Quinn & Staines, 1979). Jayaratne and Chess (1983) explained that their three stress variables (role ambiguity, role conflict, and workload) followed the role theory of Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn& Snoek (1964) while the remaining variables (challenge, comfort, financial rewards, and promotion) had been empirically found to matter to turnover and burnout. However, Vinokur-Kaplan et al. (1994) dropped the role theory from Kahn et. al and invoked Herzberg's theory of work motivation instead. Their resultant specification had the "bread and butter" work conditions in Jayaratne and Chess (1983) and "workplace motivators" such as job challenge and promotion opportunities. It was felt that these are factors that "Social Work administrators may have influence" (p. 94). On the other hand, Tam & Mong (2005) on burnout of school Social Workers combined some of the variables in Jayaratne and Chess (1983) into a job stress index and considered also a perceived inequality between Social Worker and client.

Hence, the literature comes across as haphazard in that each study puts together fragments of one theory with fragments of another theory so that different pieces of research use different combinations of theories and past specifications. In fact, the conceptual theories that the various research cite bring us in circles. While Collings and Murray (1996) included burnout as an independent variable to job satisfaction, Takeda, Ibaraki, Yokoyama, Miyake and Ohida (2005) switched it around and use job satisfaction as an independent variable to burnout.

All in all, the literature on Social Workers has not helped in understanding the nature and effects of Social Work remuneration. Somehow, there is concern about salary, but nailing down the empirical effects of salary seems illusive. Perhaps advocating for improved salaries is unjustified for an altruistic profession. Perhaps changing salaries is too tall a task in comparison to improving interpersonal dimensions of practice (e.g. supervision). Changing salaries will require dealing with structures of funding, which Social Workers and managers have much less control over compared to

on-the-job interpersonal factors. For instance, after finding that satisfaction with salary and promotion opportunities decreased as work load increased, Rautkis and Koeske (1994) concluded that supervisors "have access to a variety of intangible, non-monetary rewards which can be used to make the work place and working relationships more rewarding even when work load is high and formal compensation less than adequate." (p .53)

However, if inadequate Social Work pay does lead to burn out, job dissatisfaction, and turnover, Social Work administration needs to find ways to improve the situation. These outcomes could lead to inferior work and reinforce a vicious cycle of burnout and turnover. Ineffective work by Social Workers and social services impacts not only Social Workers, but more seriously, the lives of people that they are supposed to help. At the time of the writing of this paper, the world is reeling from a financial crisis that is causing massive layoffs from banks in the United States to manufacturing plants in Singapore. Governments around the world are enacting aggressive fiscal policy to rescue jobs and aid those who have lost their jobs. Over the long-term, policy makers are increasingly worried about widening inequality and stagnation of low-skilled wages due to globalization, and governments around the world have increased commitment to aiding the working poor through workfare programmes (Hoefer & Midgley, 2006). Social Workers are the frontline staff providing such financial as well as other social services to low income households. The effectiveness of national and agency-based programs to the poor depends heavily on the discretionary help given by such front line staff. In a time when governments are increasing aid to the disadvantaged, what a waste of resources if high turnover and low job satisfaction lead to ineffective care for the low-income.

A Model of Compensating Wage Differential

The Compensating Wage Differential model in Labor Economics can be used to explain low salary and high turnover among Social Workers. In this framework, wage is used to compensate employees for taking on more risks at work. In the Social Work context, we can think of risks as

stressful people-centered work, so more risks entail taking more cases that are more challenging. The employee's trade-off between risk and compensation can be depicted by an "indifference curve" such as U_{RL1} in Figure 1. Everywhere on the indifference curve, the employee has the same level of satisfaction or "utility". The indifference curve is upward sloping: for the employee to be willing to take on more risks and stay on the same level of utility, he or she has to be compensated more. The slope is convex because as the level of risks increases, higher and higher rates of compensation are required to keep the employee at the same level of satisfaction. A higher wage rate at a given risk level gives the employee more satisfaction, hence indifference curves higher in the north-west region represent higher satisfaction levels.

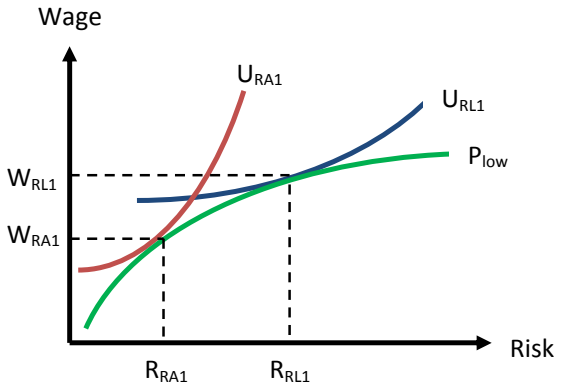

Figure 1. Indifference Curves of Risk-Loving and Risk-Averse Employees and Isoprofit of Employer with Low Resources

On the employer side, the employer has an isoprofit, depicted by P_{low} in Figure 1. An isoprofit gives the tradeoffs of risk and wage rate for a given level of profit. The employer is willing to pay more to compensate employees for taking more risks (hence upward sloping). However, as it pays more and more, holding other things constant, the employer is less and less able to pay as much as previously, hence the isoprofit is concave. Opposite to the indifference curve, for a given level of risk, a lower wage gives the employer more profits, so isoprofits to the south-east region yield higher profits. The equilibrium wage rate and risk level are given by the point where the employee's indifference curve and the employer's isoprofit are tangent to each other. Any other

point on the same indifference curve will give the employer lower profits and any other point on the same isoprofit will give the employee a lower utility.

Having outlined the basic model, we can now consider different types of employees and employers to explain Social Workers' wage differential with other professions. On the employee's end, a risk-averse individual will have a steep indifference curve (U_{RA1}) while a risk-loving individual will have a shallow indifference curve (U_{RL1}). In Social Work, such risk-lovers can be characterized as those who exhibit unusual passion for helping people. When matched with employers' isoprofit, the passionate or altruistic employee gets hired at a higher wage rate (W_{RL1}) for taking on a higher level of risk and the risk-averse employee will be hired at lower wage rate (W_{RA1}) and risk.

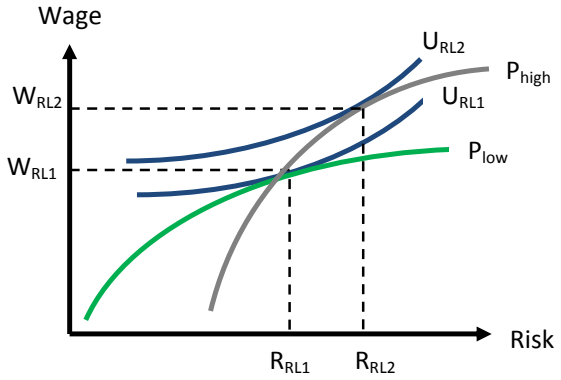

Figure 2. Employers with Low and High Resource Levels

However, this is not the end of the story. A big factor is the resources of the employer. Social services are typically non-profits operating with limited budget. Such an employer is represented in Figure 2 by a very flat isoprofit (P_{low}). In contrast, an employer with plentiful resources and is able to offer higher increases in wage rate to compensate for risks (P_{high}) has a steep isoprofit. Therefore, the passionate Social Worker can earn an even higher wage rate by taking on just a little bit more risk if he or she switches to the resource-rich employer. Thus is the story of the Social Worker: while his or her passion and altruism are more valued than one with less passion and altruism, that passion is hard to sustain when there is more competitive demand for that passion from other sectors that can pay more.

Note next in Figure 3 that the indifference curve of the risk-averse employee meets the isoprofit of the resource-rich employer at a lower indifference curve (U_{RA2}) than U_{RA1}. Hence, the equilibrium of the two types of employees and two types of employers, as shown in Figure 4, is that the risk-loving employee will take on more risks and work for the resource-rich employer while the risk-averse employee accepts a lower salary from the resource poor employer to accept less risk. The sad implication of the model is that the social service sector, which has a lower ability to pay, ends up with lower quality staff because they are more willing to accept low wage rates.

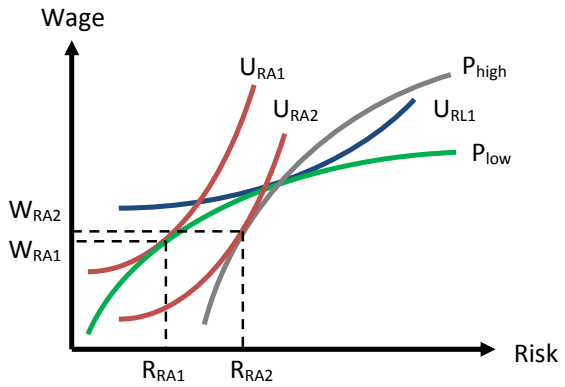

Figure 3. Employers with Low and High Resources and Risk-averse Employee

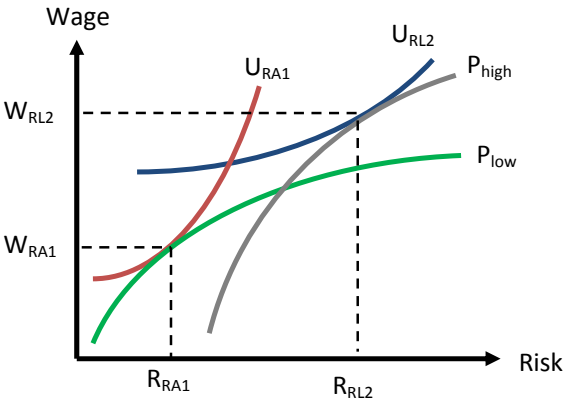

Figure 4. Equilibrium with Different Types of Employees and Employers

The theoretical model poses several implications for empirical specification. First, wage and risk decisions are made together in this model. That is, a worker finds it harder to persevere on when remuneration does not commensurate with the high stress and workload. On the other hand, when

compensation is high, the worker is able to find motivation to keep going. Therefore, in empirical specifications, effects of salary cannot be studied independently of stress variables such as workload or burnout. This may explain why past research has found mixed independent effects of salary on turnover. A minimum specification might require an interaction term between salary and the risk variable.

A second empirical implication is that when studying job dissatisfaction, it might be important to distinguish satisfaction with salary from satisfaction over other aspects classified in the economic model as "risk". Decomposing a global satisfaction scale into salary satisfaction and intrinsic satisfaction, Rauktis and Koeske (1994) found that as work load increased, satisfaction with salary and promotion opportunities declined. For the other studies that measured job satisfaction with a general question "how satisfied are you with your job?", it is unclear whether respondents would be thinking only of intrinsic factors or also of salary as well. It would therefore be hard to find meaningful associations between salary and job satisfaction in such studies.

The third implication has to do with the specification of turnover. So far, the existing literature takes turnover to mean simply leaving one's job. Generally, this would include those who leave one Social Work job for another as well as those who leave the profession. However, such a measure of turnover poses another difficulty in finding effects from salary. As Poulin (1994) suggested, those who are dissatisfied with the salary will have left the profession. Therefore, although the model tells us that individuals with lower salaries and higher stress should be more inclined to leave their jobs, the results are biased by the fact that if the sector overall has low salaries, those who are unhappy about salaries in the sector would have left, and will not be in the pool of respondents still remaining in the sector. If we are interested in the implication of low Social Work pay, then, a better way to test the model would be to move the analysis from the individual or agency level to the profession level. Instead of studying turnover from one job to another, the study should focus on the retention of Social Workers in the profession.

What kind of data would be needed for such studies? If one has the resources to collect longitudinal panel data, one could conduct cohort studies of stayers and leavers. With cross-section data, one could compare Social Work salaries and turnover with similar professions such as teaching and nursing. A longitudinal study of stayers and leavers of the profession is unavailable in Singapore. Nevertheless, using aggregate level comparative data and data from two surveys, the discussion that follows is able to provide a snapshot of the Singapore Social Work scene that is consistent with the economic model.

Are Social Workers' Salaries That Low?

Over the past two years, Social Work remuneration has been featured in national level political discourse. In 2007, the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) started the process of raising the professional status of Social Work through its first celebration of Social Worker's Day. At the celebration on January 20, 2007, the Minister for Community Development Youth and Sports announced that Social Workers' salaries would be raised (Tan, 2007, January 20). At the next year's Social Workers' Day, a professionalization package was announced that included sabbatical leave, skills upgrading, and accreditation.

Survey by the Singapore Association of Social Workers

In March 2008, the SASW conducted a simple e-mail survey of its members to find out whether the salary increments announced a year ago had materialized. Besides asking about increment, the survey also asked about salary and reasons for joining, staying, and leaving the profession. These are variables of interest in this study. Although the response rate of 13% (total membership was 538) was low, the distribution of respondents into their sectors of work look similar to the distribution of the Association's membership. Most SASW members work in family service centers and fewer work in the government sector. In the survey, the distribution was 48% family, 15% medical, 6% government, and 31% others (which includes youth, elderly, and children). In addition, despite the small sample size, as will be seen, the salary levels were comparable to those published at the national level.

The analysis of the survey findings in this section will focus on 67 cases (out of 70 who responded) with valid answers for all the areas of interest. The discussion will begin with years of service and followed by reasons for joining, staying and leaving. These areas relate to job retention and turnover. The discussion will end off by comparing the findings on salary in the SASW survey with a survey of the recent graduating batch of Social Workers and with national data.

Figure 5 gives the distribution of respondents by years of service. A large proportion of Social Workers who responded to the survey had 2 or 3 years of field experience. Interestingly, none of the respondents reported having worked 6 and 7 years. Most worked fewer than six years, and the frequencies by year creep up after passing the seven year mark. Mean and median years in the profession were 5.2 and 3, respectively. Although not representative, the null responses from Social Workers in their sixth and seventh year suggest high attrition during these two years. It also appears that after seven years, respondents are more likely to stay on the longer they stay.

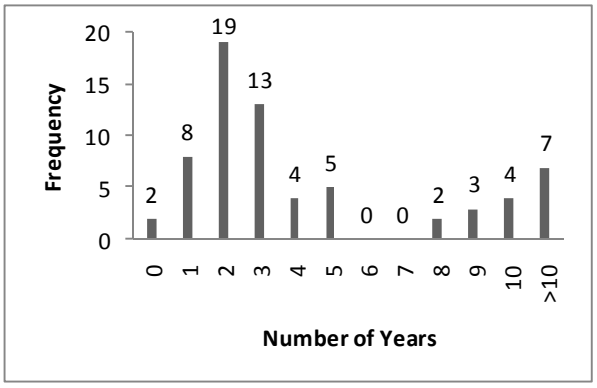

Figure 5. Number of Social Workers according to years in Social Work (N=67)

Another indicator of attrition might be the number of Social Workers relative to the number of Social Work graduates. However, these numbers are unknown, and estimations need to be made. For a small country with no Social Work licensing, a slight overestimation of the number of Social Workers might be 1,000. This number assumes that the membership of SASW (538 as of January 2009) represents slightly more than half of all practicing Social Workers. What about the number of Social Work graduates? Professional Social Work in Singapore began in 1952, when the first batch of eight Social Work students graduated from the National University of Singapore (NUS) (Wee, 2002).

Today, NUS graduates about 100 students per year. Besides NUS, two other institutions – Monash University and UniSIM – have in the past two years graduated 30 students each. Rounding down to a total of 150 Social Work graduates per year, and assuming a linear growth since 1952, an annual average of 80 students ((8+150)/2 = 79, rounded up) graduate each year. Assuming a work life of 50 years, there should currently be a pool of 4,000 Social Work graduates. With an estimated 1,000 practicing Social Workers, retention rate is only a quarter. That is, three quarters of Social Work graduates are estimated to not only quit their jobs, but even quit the profession completely.

By the Compensating Wage Differential model, such high attrition rate should be accompanied by low salaries and high workload or stress. Indeed, when asked about what reasons would cause them to leave the field (Figure 6), a huge proportion of respondents (68%) cited low pay. The other commonly cited reasons included high workload (53%), burnout (52%), and having more attractive opportunities elsewhere (51%). In contrast, people stayed in or were drawn to the profession for altruistic and self-actualization reasons. Figure 7 indicates that the three primary reasons that prompted Social Workers to join and stay in the field were firstly, an interest in working with people; secondly, a desire to help the disadvantaged; and finally, a sense of fulfillment from the job (62%). Least cited reasons for both joining and staying include sufficient pay and positive public image of Social Work.

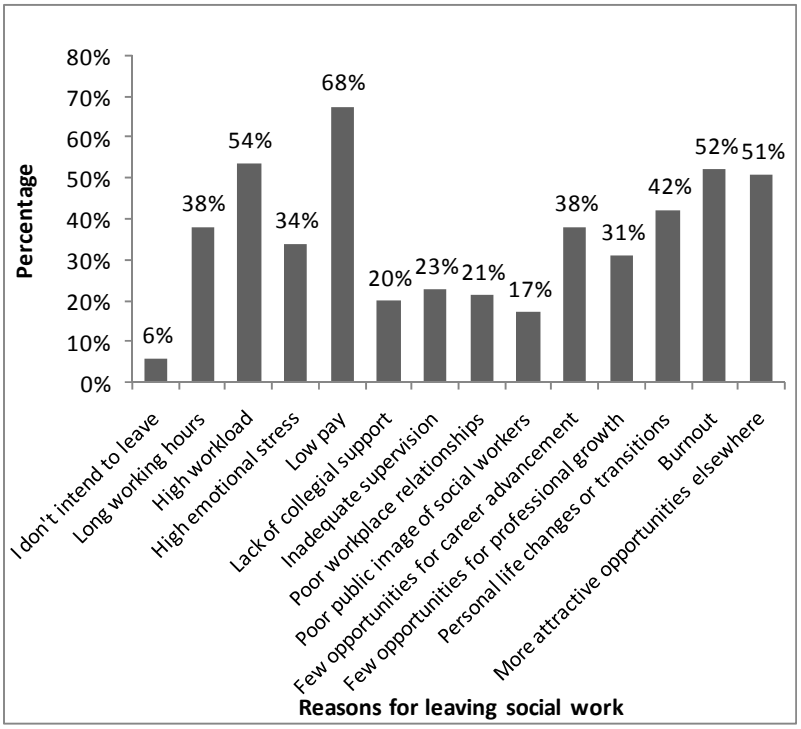

Figure 6. Reasons for leaving the profession (N=67)

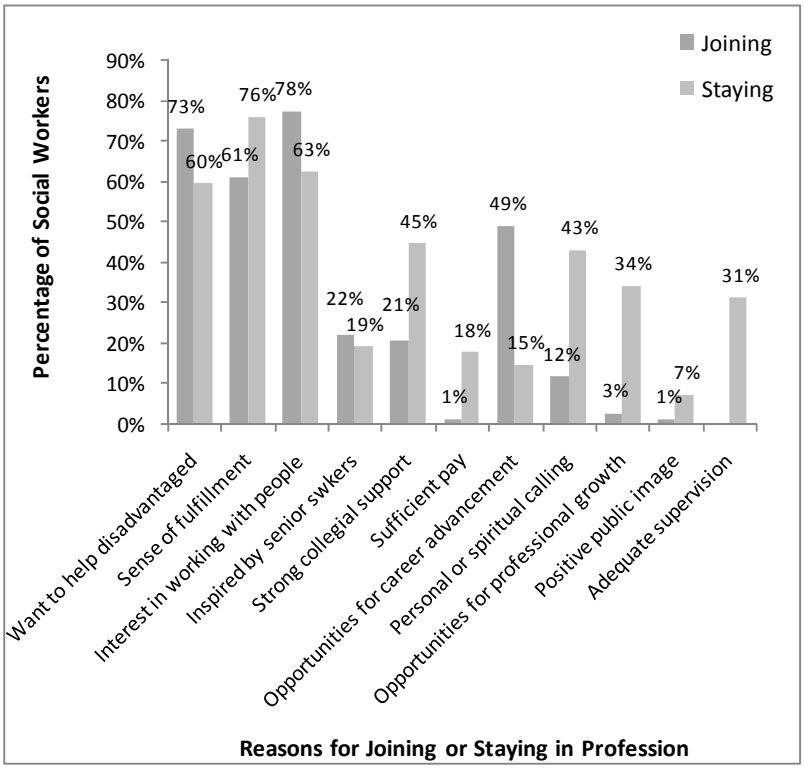

Figure 7. Reasons for joining and staying on in the profession (N=67)

Finally, we turn to salary levels. The mean monthly earnings of respondents were $2,985. Median, minimum, and maximum earnings were $2500, $2000, and $10000 respectively. The top earner of $10,000, however, is an anomaly. Figure 8 presents the average earnings of Social Workers according to the number of years they spent in Social Work. The mean monthly wage was only $4,527 for the 13 who had been Social Workers for 10 years or more. Excluding the outlying case who reported earning $10,000 lowered the mean wage for the remaining 12 veterans to $4,336. Although there is a general progression in salary by years of service, the increase is obviously small. Things may be changing for new Social Workers, as those with a year's experience or less are paid more than those with two to three years of service.

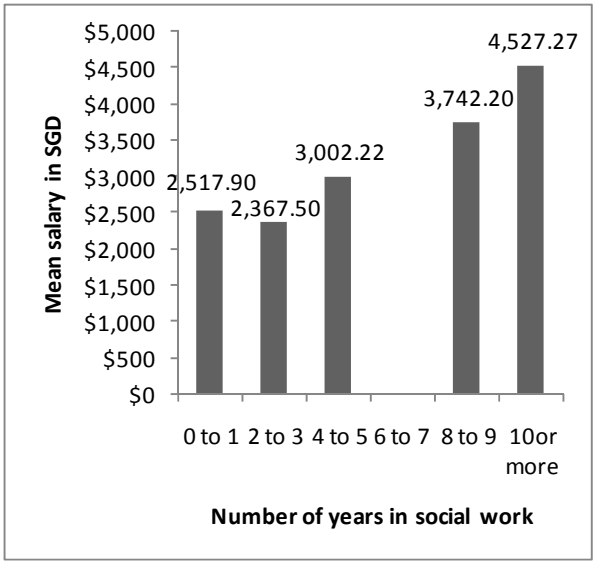

Figure 8. Mean salary of Social Workers by years in Social Work (N=67)

Comparative Analysis of Social Work Salaries

How has Social Workers' salaries fared through time? Lee and Ghoh (2002) had found a mean salary of $1,994 among their sample of 145 graduates between 1996 and 1999 who had taken Social Work jobs. Trimming the SASW 2008 survey sample to the 51 respondents who had worked five years or fewer gives a more comparable sample to the sample in Lee and Ghoh. The resultant mean per month earnings of $2,509 is only $515 more for a sample that is surveyed about eight

years later. This translates into an annual wage adjustment of 2.9%, a rate that hardly keeps up with inflation.

Looking ahead, with the announced salary adjustments, starting salaries of new entrants should be better. The authors surveyed the 2008 Honors' graduates from the National University of Singapore. Out of 49 who graduated in May 2008, 24 who had become Social Workers responded to the survey. By October 2008, the 24 respondents had mean and median starting salaries of $2,533 and $2,500 respectively. This amount is the median amount of the SASW survey, and the amounts were almost the same whether respondents were in medical, government, or other sectors. Graduates with Honors degrees earn more than basic degree holders. They would have performed better academically and studied an additional "Honors'" year, completing their degrees in four instead of three years. However, the salary difference is not much. For Medical Social Workers, the difference is between $100 to $200 depending on the class of Honors. It seems, then, that salaries of new Social Workers have improved. It seems, then, that the salary adjustments have improved starting salaries.

How do these numbers compare with those for other professions and in other countries? Table 1 reports median monthly salaries of various professions - including Social Work - in Singapore, the U.S. and U.K. For illustrative purposes, we included a profession often compared with Social Work - nursing - and also more lucrative and popular professions that students sometimes choose instead of Social Work, namely accounting, engineering, and computing.

Table 1.

Monthly Gross Wage of Selected Occupations in 2007 (SGD)

	Singapore[a]		United States[b]		U.K.[c]	
	SGD	% of median	SGD[d]	% of median	SGD[d]	% of median
Social Work	2,450	61	4,804	80	6,346	85
Professional/registered Nursing	3,369	84	6,957	116	5,551	74
Accounting	3,871	96	6,614	110	7,913	106
Computing	4,237	105	5,703	95	8,168	109
Median of all professionals	4,030		6,004		7,475	

Notes.

a. Report of Wages 2007 (average of Social Worker and medical Social Worker)
b. Bureau of Labor Statistics
c. UK Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2007
d. Exchange rates: 1 USD = 1.5071 SGD and 1 £= 3.0161 (Yearbook of Statistics Singapore, 2008)

The first notable finding is that the median wage of Social Workers from this table of S$2,450 is close to the median wage obtained by the SASW survey, an indication that the small survey by SASW is not far off in representation of the profession. To the right of each country's salary numbers are percentages relative to the median monthly wage of all professionals. It is clear that Social Workers are lowly paid in all three countries. However, Social Workers' salaries in Singapore are much lower than the median compared to the U.S. and U.K. All three country sources include B.S.W. as well as M.S.W. and above degree Social Work professionals, but the proportion of Social Workers with Master's and above degrees is probably lower in Singapore. Still it is striking that Social Workers in Singapore earn only 60% of the median professional's wage. In fact, the Report of Wages in Singapore 2007 lists Social Workers and Medical Social Workers as second and fifth lowest paid among professionals. And before 2006, the Report of Wages did not even list Social Workers as professionals. They were categorized as semi-professionals.

Among the professionals in Table 1, nurses are probably the most comparable to Social Workers and even they earn considerably more than Social Workers. In Singapore, one profession that many Social Work degree holders join instead of Social Work is teaching. Average salaries of teachers are not published in Singapore. However, the Ministry of Education publishes starting salaries, and the amount in comparison to Social Work is very telling. The starting salary is $2,600 for basic degree holders and $2,750 to $2,900 for Honors' degree holders. Compare these to the median amount of $2,500 in both the SASW and 2008 Honors' cohort survey, and the disparity is clear.

From the celebration of Social Workers to a Minister's announcement of salary revision and professionalization package, to the Report of Wages recognizing it as a profession, to the higher salaries of the most recent graduating cohort, Singapore has improved Social Workers' remuneration and work conditions. The efforts target both the employees and employers' sides in the Compensating Wage Differential Model. Raising Social Workers' salaries have been increased

through injecting more funding to social service agencies (shifting the isoprofit from P_{low} to P_{high}). The professionalization package, on the other hand, is aimed at preventing Social Worker burnout which may slip Social Workers' passion from U_{RL1} to U_{RA1} or push the resilience and passion further to be flatter than U_{RL1}.

However, catching up with salaries of other occupations seems an uphill task given the gap in resources between social service agencies and other types of employers. At some level, it is a given that Social Workers' passion for people and altruism can sustain them from jumping ship to other sectors where they may be less inclined. However, where wage differential with other professions is large, it will take an extremely driven individual to persevere in Social Work. As Social Workers in Singapore rejoiced over the wage increment announcement, the joy was dampened five months later. In July 2007, it was announced that civil service salary would be increased by between $170 to $620. As illustration, an engineer with a good Honors degree (i.e. second upper Honors and above) would get $3,190 instead $2,570 and an economics graduate will get $3,320 instead of $2,850 (Lee, 2007, May 22). Compared to the mean salary increment of $341 for new Social Workers, these announced increases have pulled other salaries further ahead. According to the Compensating Wage Differential model, it is not simply the level of the salary that will induce Social Workers to leave, but the difference in wage. These alternative professions will be more attractive, and indeed teaching and civil service have been close substitutes to direct Social Work practice.

What if Social Workers are Paid More? Implications for Future Research and Policy

It seems, then, that while there is recognition that Social Workers' salaries are too low to commensurate with their work nature, their work is still not as valued as other occupations that are deemed to directly contribute to the economy. Perhaps it is viewed that raising salaries by too much will increase costs of social service agencies by too much. A next research might be to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to illustrate the potential cost efficiency of better remuneration. Economic theory provides some important hypotheses for such a cost-benefit analysis. For the agency, higher

remuneration may translate lower costs if it results in higher quality service, more effective outcomes, and lower turnover. The costs of re-hiring, retraining, and correcting the negative effects of ineffective intervention could offset the savings from paying lower wages. However, one problem is that the benefits of social services do not accrue to the agency or the funders themselves but to society. Hence, the direct benefits of more effective intervention will not be adequately captured by the individual agency. This is the classic market failure problem of externalities. Another market failure problem is that although demand for services by those being served is high, demand according to funders' ability-to-pay is low.

Given the above market failure problems in social services, raising Social Workers' salaries cannot be left to market forces. Government intervention is needed. Furthermore, according to the Compensating Wage Differential model, intervention should raise relative, not absolute wages. The resolve to improve remuneration for Social Workers will require a weighing of the priority of the work that Social Workers do relative to other occupations. As long as other professionals are more valued more than Social Workers, Social Work salaries will continue to trail others, even with government intervention.

What indeed is the priority of the contribution of the social sector relative to other sectors such as economy or defense? It has been argued that in public policy, priority has tended to privy economic policy, with social policy left to pick up the pieces that economic policies fail to address. However, there has been increasing recognition that social policy should take equal priority (Mkandawire, 2001). With the trends of globalisation and widening inequality, the role of Social Workers as the frontline safety net to bottom income earners is becoming increasingly crucial. We need to maximize the human capital of Social Workers as well as the low-skilled. Social cohesion that results from meeting the needs of the underclass is also important to maintaining the social infrastructure needed for continued economic progress. Thus far, we have used economics to argue the case for intervention to raise Social Workers' salary. However, a less economic but equally valid

argument is simply the value of humans. The down and out of society require quality and professional care, and cannot simply rely on the bleeding hearts of altruism.

Professional quality depends on salary, but also on other work factors. While the Compensating Wage Differential model succinctly shows the relationship between salary and turnover, it is less helpful in explaining other aspects of work that the model lumps under "risk". The "risk" dimension could include burnout, non-salary factors of job satisfaction, work load, stress etc. These other factors seem to be what the current literature has been more pre-occupied with, and other social sciences such as psychology and sociology might provide better insights on them than economics. The key implication of the economic model is that salary is not independent of these other factors, which means that there is a limit to how much effectiveness and staff retention can be improved by targeting only on the non-salary factors. According to the model, Social Workers will have to come to terms that their salaries will be lower than many other professions. When they commit to working on behalf of the needy, they will have to accept that this is no job for getting rich. However, the economic theories also challenge the profession to a loftier goal of raising standards to a higher plane than incremental improvements derived from improving work procedures such as better supervision and support; of overcoming structures resulting in the failure of the Social Work labor market. The market failure and societal well-being arguments deem it necessary that we do not leave the sector to its own resources.

In Singapore, at least, there is potential that the status of Social Workers' through their professional recognition and salary can be raised. This is not a far-fetched ideal, because the Singapore government has done it before with the teaching profession and the civil service. In many countries, teaching does not pay well, and the reasoning is the same as that for Social Work – teaching is a calling and hence low salaries are understandable. However, the Singapore government has chosen to raise the professional status of teachers through raising their salaries and training rigor. Education is felt to be crucial to training human resources, a most precious if not the only resource available to this small island country. Similarly, the Singapore government benchmarked

civil service salaries to the private sector to prevent corruption and retain talent in the government sector.

In Singapore, efforts to improve professionalization of Social Work through salary adjustments, licensure, and training have begun. The findings from two surveys and aggregate cross-country data quite clearly show low salaries and high attrition. Future research using bigger and longer-duration data will provide stronger tests of the theoretical conclusions and better understand the Social Work labor market.

For now, the case study shows that while the process of professionalization has begun, efforts need to be more substantial to make Social Work more comparable to other occupations. Besides government intervention per se, how the intervention is implemented will also be crucial. The Singapore case suggests that increasing Social Workers' salary while increasing the salaries of other occupations even more defeats the purpose. Feedback from the field has also highlighted that government funding of social service programs by block grants keep salaries depressed. Funders need to specify funding for manpower in order that employers do not sell staff short. The theoretical implications of better remuneration for Social Workers is the same in any country, and what is happening in Singapore can be lessons for the Social Work profession in other countries.

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