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WHEN SATISFACTION LOSES ITS GRIP: CONSTRAINT, MOBILITY AND TURNOVER INTENTION AMONG EXPATRIATE EDUCATORS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention is among the most robust findings in organisational research, yet it may weaken among internationally mobile professionals. This study sets out to examine two competing explanations for such weakening. A dilution account holds that abundant alternatives weaken the satisfaction–intention link uniformly across a mobile workforce. A decoupling account holds that practical constraints, such as visas, family obligations and children's schooling, sever the link for some employees while leaving it intact for others. The accounts were formalised as six propositions and examined with survey data from 52 self-initiated expatriate educators in international high schools in Guangzhou, China, supplemented by written interviews with eleven educators. Satisfaction correlated with organisational commitment (r = .73) at the strength predicted by meta-analytic benchmarks, but its correlation with turnover intention (r = −.26) was significantly weaker than the benchmark of −.58. In an exploratory moderation analysis, satisfaction was strongly related to turnover intention among educators reporting low constraint (r = −.55) and unrelated to it among those reporting high constraint (r = .17), a pattern more consistent with decoupling than with dilution. Both results were sensitive to a single influential case and to restricted variance in the constrained group, and are offered as directions for theory rather than established effects. The study concludes that heterogeneity in constraint, rather than mobility itself, may explain a weakened satisfaction–intention link in mobile labour markets, and that low turnover intention among constrained employees can conceal detachment.

Keywords: Turnover Intention; Job Satisfaction; Job Embeddedness; Self-Initiated Expatriates; International Schools; Mobility Constraint

1 INTRODUCTION

Ask an experienced manager why people leave and the answer will usually begin with how they feel about their job. Research has given that intuition firm support. In a meta-analysis of 178 samples, Tett and Meyer estimated a corrected correlation of −.58 between job satisfaction and turnover intention [1], and the relationship has been replicated across

occupations, countries and decades [2,3]. So well established is the link that satisfaction surveys have become a standard tool for managing retention.

This article examines a setting in which the link appeared to weaken. In a study of expatriate educators in international high schools in Guangzhou, China, satisfaction was related to organisational commitment at almost exactly the strength that domestic research predicts, yet it was only weakly related to the intention to leave [4]. If satisfied teachers were as committed as usual, why were they not correspondingly less inclined to leave? The question matters for theory, because it suggests that a central link in the attitudinal account of turnover depends on labour-market conditions that the account usually treats as background. It matters for practice, because schools that rely on satisfaction surveys to judge retention risk may be misled if the link is weak.

Two explanations suggest themselves. The first draws on the classic distinction between the desirability and the ease of movement [5]: expatriate educators work in a market in which moving is easy and normal, so satisfaction may simply matter less when leaving is a routine career step. The second draws on the job embeddedness tradition [6]: some expatriate educators are tied to their posts by visas, partners and children's schooling, and their intentions may be shaped by what they can do rather than by how they feel. The two explanations make different, testable predictions.

The question has become more pressing as the international school workforce has changed. Much of the literature on international teachers concerns a workforce recruited mainly from Britain and North America [7]. Schools in China and elsewhere in Asia now recruit far more widely; the educators in the present study came from 23 countries. Their circumstances differ accordingly: some are young and unattached, whereas others have partners who are host-country nationals, children in local or international schools, or visa conditions that make a change of employer complicated. A workforce this varied contains both people for whom leaving is easy and people for whom it is very hard, and it is this variation on which the present argument turns.

The objective of this study is therefore threefold: to specify two mechanisms that could weaken the satisfaction–intention relationship in a mobile professional labour market, to formalise them as testable propositions, and to examine the limited available evidence on which of the two is more plausible. The aim is not to overturn the satisfaction–intention relationship but to specify the conditions under which it holds.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

2.1 Desirability and ease of movement

Modern turnover theory begins with March and Simon's theory of organisational equilibrium [5]. Employees decide whether to leave by weighing the perceived desirability of movement, which reflects satisfaction with the present job, against the perceived ease of movement, which reflects available alternatives. Two implications of this formulation are often overlooked: satisfaction is only one half of the decision, and its effect may depend on the other half. A dissatisfied employee with no alternatives may stay; a satisfied employee with many alternatives may leave.

Later models elaborated the first half far more than the second. Mobley's intermediate-linkages model mapped the cognitive steps from dissatisfaction to quitting and placed the evaluation of alternatives late in the sequence [8]; Porter and Steers emphasised met expectations [9]; and the commitment tradition proposed that satisfaction consolidates into a stable attachment that restrains exit [10,11]. In these accounts the labour market enters mainly as a moderator of the step from intention to behaviour, not of the step from attitude to intention. Meta-analyses have found that perceived alternatives add only modestly to the prediction of turnover once attitudes are known [2]. However, employees in most domestic samples face broadly similar labour markets, so the ease of movement varies little between them, and a predictor that varies little cannot explain much variance. The modest average contribution of alternatives may therefore reflect restricted range in the samples on which it was estimated rather than the true importance of the labour market.

2.2 Embeddedness, perceived control and the formation of intentions

Two later traditions loosened the attitudinal account further. The unfolding model argued that many people leave in response to a shock, such as an unsolicited offer, rather than through a gradual build-up of dissatisfaction [12]. Job embeddedness theory showed that people stay for reasons unrelated to how they feel about their jobs: they are bound by links to other people, a sense of fit and the sacrifices that leaving would entail, both in the organisation and in the community [6]. A century of research has thus moved from a focus on individual attitudes towards the many contexts that shape the decision to stay or leave [13]. Embeddedness has mostly been used to explain behaviour, but its logic applies equally to intentions: if leaving is practically unthinkable, an employee may report no intention to leave even when dissatisfied.

The theory of planned behaviour sharpens this point. Intentions are shaped not only by attitudes and social norms but also by perceived behavioural control, that is, a person's sense of whether the behaviour is within their power [14]. Where control is low, intentions follow attitudes only weakly, because people do not form firm intentions to do what they believe they cannot do. A teacher who is dissatisfied but whose child is midway through a two-year programme is unlikely to report a strong intention to leave this year, however unhappy they are. Ease of movement, in March and Simon's formulation, is a property of the labour market; perceived behavioural control is a property of the individual's situation. The two coincide when alternatives are scarce for everyone, but diverge when the market is open and some individuals are tied down. The expatriate educator labour market produces precisely this divergence.

2.3 Why attachment should be insulated from constraint

Commitment theory gives reason to expect the link between satisfaction and attachment to be insulated from the labour market. Social exchange theory treats affective commitment as the relational consequence of a favourable exchange: employees who feel valued and fairly treated develop an emotional bond with the organisation [15,16], and perceived organisational support is among the strongest antecedents of that bond [17,18]. None of these processes depends on whether the employee could leave. A teacher tied to Guangzhou by a partner's career can feel valued or neglected just as readily as one who is free to go. Constraint should therefore affect what employees say about their plans, not how attached they feel. This makes the comparison between the satisfaction–commitment and satisfaction–intention links diagnostic: any market-level or individual-level effect on intention should leave the former untouched.

2.4 The expatriate educator labour market

International schooling has grown rapidly, and there are now more than 15,000 English-medium international schools worldwide, with China hosting more than any other country [19]; the number of such schools is reported to have roughly doubled between 2012 and 2022 [20]. These schools recruit continuously and across borders, typically on two-year contracts, and much of their teaching workforce consists of self-initiated expatriates who have chosen to work abroad and found their own posts [21]. Moving after two or three contracts is regarded as a normal career pattern, and the sector has been described as precarious and insecure [7,22]. Expatriates' awareness of alternative employers has long been argued to amplify turnover intentions [23], and in a dense regional market such as the Greater Bay Area a teacher in Guangzhou can find alternatives in Shenzhen, Hong Kong or elsewhere in Asia with little difficulty.

The same market also produces ties. Expatriates depend on their employer for their visa and often for housing and their children's schooling [24]. Many have partners whose careers or families are in the host country, and moving a child in the middle of a high school programme such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma is something many parents will go to considerable lengths to avoid. These ties are unevenly distributed and change over time: a teacher who arrives alone may later form a relationship with a local partner, and a teacher who arrives with young children will later have children in examination courses. A cross-sectional snapshot will therefore capture a mixture of constrained and unconstrained educators, so that the satisfaction–intention relationship observed across a staffroom may be weaker than the relationship that holds for any individual who is free to choose. The qualitative literature on international teachers is consistent with this picture. Contract renewal decisions are bound up with personal and professional life goals such as starting a family, seeking promotion or returning home [25]; satisfaction can decline while the decision to leave depends on wider circumstances such as travel and family life [26]; and leavers cite personal circumstances alongside leadership, salary and contractual issues [27]. The expatriate educator labour market is therefore unusual in two respects at once: ease of movement is high on average, and it varies widely between individuals. This combination makes it possible to distinguish the two accounts below.

2.5 Account A: dilution by mobility

The first account follows March and Simon directly [5]. Where the ease of movement is high for almost everyone, satisfaction raises the desirability of staying without lowering the ease of leaving. Even a satisfied educator may form an intention to move, because moving is how international careers progress. Satisfaction therefore has less leverage on intention across the whole workforce, and the weakening should be broadly uniform.

- Proposition 1 (dilution). In labour markets where the ease of movement is uniformly high, the negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention is weaker than in labour markets where the ease of movement is low.
- Proposition 2 (dilution). Under dilution, the weakening of the satisfaction–intention relationship does not depend on individual differences in constraint.

2.6 Account B: decoupling by constraint

The second account follows the embeddedness and planned-behaviour traditions. For educators tied to their posts by visas, partners or children's schooling, leaving is not a realistic near-term option, and their stated intention will reflect

that fact whatever they feel about the job. For them, satisfaction and intention are decoupled. For educators who are free to move, intention reflects how they feel about the job, and the satisfaction–intention link should be as strong as in any domestic sample. On this account, the weak link in the whole workforce is an aggregate of two groups: one in which attitudes drive intentions and one in which constraints do.

- *Proposition 3 (decoupling). The negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention is weaker among employees who face strong practical constraints on leaving than among employees who do not.*
- *Proposition 4 (decoupling). Among employees free of strong constraints, the satisfaction–intention relationship in a mobile labour market approaches the strength observed in domestic workforces.*

The decoupling account has a further implication that is easy to miss. If constrained employees report low turnover intention regardless of their attitudes, then low intention among them does not signal attachment: some will be content, while others will be detached but unable to leave.

- *Proposition 5 (decoupling). Among employees facing strong constraints, low turnover intention is a weaker indicator of affective commitment than among unconstrained employees, so that a group of "detached stayers" can exist whose intentions conceal their detachment.*

2.7 A combined account

The two accounts are not mutually exclusive. A mobile market could dilute the satisfaction–intention link for everyone to some degree while constraint severs it entirely for some. In that case the link among unconstrained employees would be weaker than in domestic samples but stronger than among constrained employees. Neither account predicts that satisfaction should lose its relationship with commitment; both locate the weakening between attitude and intention (Section 2.3). Figure 1 depicts the two accounts and Table 1 summarises the predictions that distinguish them.

- *Proposition 6 (combined). In mobile professional labour markets, the satisfaction–intention relationship is weakened both by market-level ease of movement and, more strongly, by individual-level constraint, so that its strength is lowest where constraint is high.*

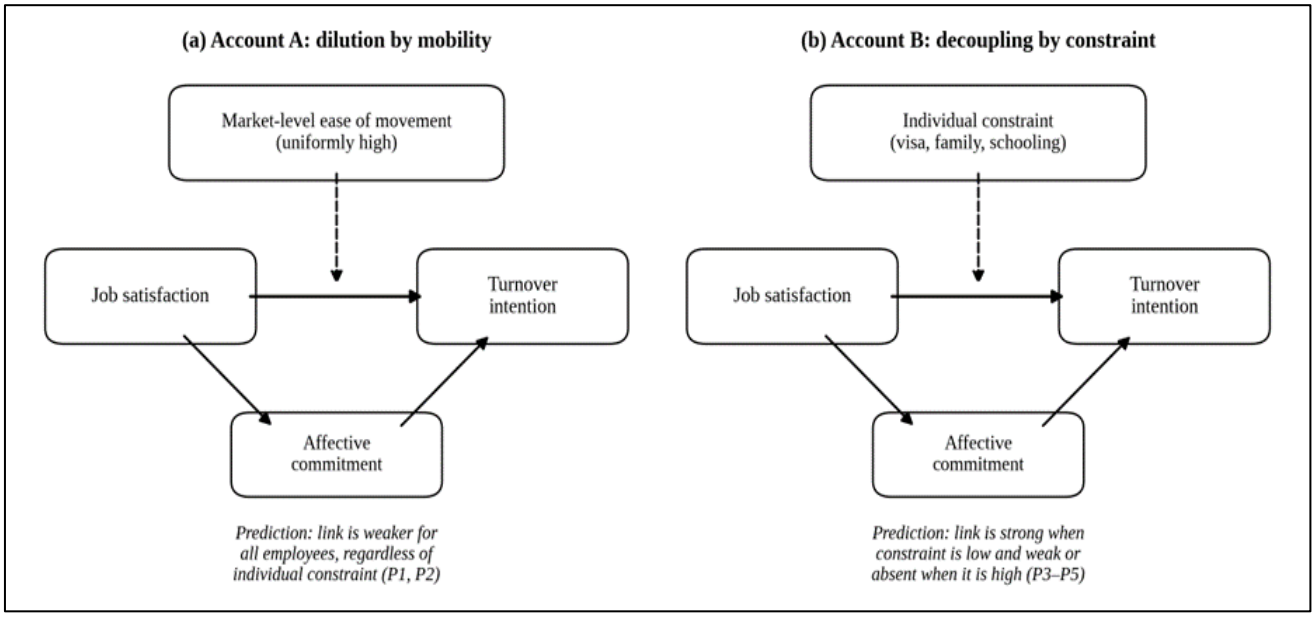


Figure 1: Two accounts of a weakened satisfaction–intention link. Solid arrows denote direct relationships; dashed arrows denote moderation. Under dilution (a), uniformly high ease of movement weakens the link for all employees. Under decoupling (b), individual constraint weakens the link, and the commitment–intention link, only for constrained employees

Table 1: Predictions that distinguish the two accounts

Observation	Dilution (Account A)	Decoupling (Account B)
Satisfaction–commitment link	Preserved	Preserved
Satisfaction–intention link, whole workforce	Weaker than domestic benchmark	Weaker than domestic benchmark
Link among unconstrained employees	Weaker than domestic benchmark	Close to domestic benchmark
Link among constrained employees	Similar to unconstrained	Weak or absent
Commitment–intention link among constrained	Similar to unconstrained	Weaker
Mean intention among constrained	Similar to unconstrained	Lower, independent of attachment

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Design, setting and participants

The data come from the quantitative strand of a mixed-methods doctoral study of expatriate educator turnover [4]. A cross-sectional online survey was completed in September and October 2026 by 52 expatriate educators working in fully international, Chinese internationalised and international private high schools in Guangzhou. Participants were recruited through professional networks rather than sampled at random. They came from 23 countries, most from sub-Saharan Africa. The moderation analysis reported in Section 4.3 is new to this article; other analyses of the same data set are reported elsewhere [4].

3.2 Measures

All items were rated on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Job satisfaction was measured with twelve items adapted from Spector [28] (α = .89). Organisational commitment was measured with nine items adapted from Meyer and Allen [29], three for each of the affective, continuance and normative components (overall α = .85). Turnover intention was measured with three items from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire [30] (α = .84). Reliability coefficients with bootstrap confidence intervals are reported in Table 2. The continuance subscale had low and imprecise reliability (α = .61, 95% CI [.15, .81]), and results involving it are interpreted cautiously.

Constraint was indexed by a single item written for the expatriate context and included in the continuance subscale: “Visa, family, and mobility factors make leaving this school complicated” (item C6). The two other continuance items referred to disruption (“Leaving this school right now would be too disruptive”) and necessity (“Staying at this school is a matter of necessity as much as desire”) in general terms. The use of a single item as a measure of constraint is a limitation discussed in Section 4.9.

3.3 Data analysis

Three sets of analyses were conducted. First, observed correlations were compared with meta-analytic benchmarks [1] using Fisher’s z test, treating each benchmark as a population value. Because the benchmarks are corrected for measurement error, the comparison was repeated with correlations disattenuated for the reliability of both measures [31]. Second, the moderating role of constraint was tested with a moderated multiple regression in which mean-centred job satisfaction, mean-centred C6 and their product predicted turnover intention. To aid interpretation, educators were also divided into those reporting high constraint (agree or strongly agree, C6 ≥ 5; n = 26) and those reporting lower constraint (C6 ≤ 4; n = 26). Correlations and unstandardised slopes were estimated within each group, and the group correlations were compared with Fisher’s z test. Third, sensitivity analyses re-estimated the key tests without one respondent identified as a multivariate outlier and examined restriction of range within groups [31]. The moderation analysis was not pre-specified and is treated as exploratory. Tests were two-tailed with α = .05.

3.4 Qualitative material

The wider study also collected written interviews from eleven educators [4]. These were not designed to test the present propositions and are used only to illustrate them. Accounts are paraphrased to protect participants’ anonymity.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The study was approved through the research ethics procedures of Westford University College and UCAM on 1 July 2026. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all participants gave informed consent before taking part.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics, reliabilities and intercorrelations. Educators were moderately satisfied (M = 4.24; 71% scoring 4 or above), and mean turnover intention lay near the scale midpoint (M = 3.58), with 40% scoring 4 or above. Satisfaction was strongly related to affective (r = .76) and normative (r = .68) commitment. Its correlation with turnover intention (r = −.26, 95% CI [−.50, .02]) did not differ significantly from zero, whereas each commitment component was significantly related to lower intention.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics, reliabilities and correlations among study variables (n = 52)

Variable	M	SD	α [95% CI]	1	2	3	4
1. Job satisfaction	4.24	0.84	0.89 [.83, .93]				
2. Affective commitment	4.08	1.15	0.89 [.80, .94]	0.76***			
3. Continuance commitment	4.06	1.03	0.61 [.15, .81]	0.27	0.19		
4. Normative commitment	3.47	1.19	0.86 [.76, .92]	0.68***	0.71***	0.41**	
5. Turnover intention	3.58	1.27	0.84 [.68, .93]	−0.26	−0.42**	−0.33*	−0.35*

Note. Six-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Confidence intervals for α are percentile bootstrap intervals (2,000 resamples). Overall organisational commitment (nine items): M = 3.87, SD = 0.89, α = .85 [.76, .90]; r = .73 with job satisfaction and r = −.46 with turnover intention. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

4.2 Where the chain weakens

Figure 2 compares the present correlations with their meta-analytic benchmarks [1]. The satisfaction–commitment correlation (r = .73) was almost identical to the benchmark of .70 (z = 0.43, p = .668), and the commitment–intention correlation (r = −.46) did not differ significantly from its benchmark of −.54 (z = 0.75, p = .455). The satisfaction–intention correlation (r = −.26), however, was significantly weaker than the benchmark of −.58 (z = 2.80, p = .005), and satisfaction accounted for about 7% of the variance in intention, compared with about 34% implied by the benchmark. On a like-for-like basis, with observed correlations corrected for unreliability, the same pattern held: satisfaction–commitment ρ = .84, commitment–intention ρ = −.54 and satisfaction–intention ρ = −.30, the last still weaker than the benchmark (z = 2.47, p = .014). The weakening therefore lay where both accounts predicted: between attitude and intention, not between satisfaction and attachment.

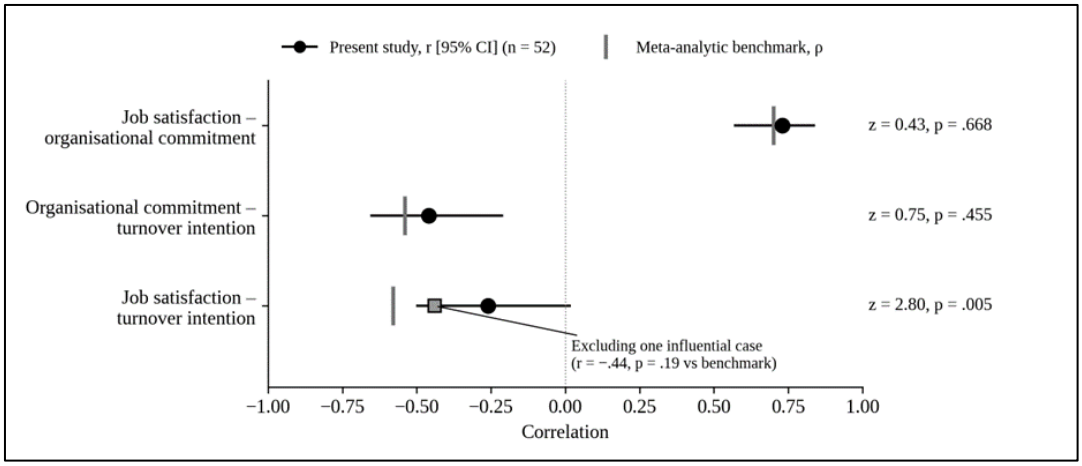


Figure 2: Observed correlations (n = 52) with 95% confidence intervals against meta-analytic benchmarks. Fisher's z tests compare each observed correlation with its benchmark. The grey square shows the satisfaction–intention correlation with one influential case excluded

This result requires a qualification. One respondent combined very low satisfaction and commitment with the lowest possible turnover intention. Without that respondent, the satisfaction–intention correlation was −.44, and the difference from the benchmark was no longer significant (p = .19). The departure from the benchmark is therefore a direction worth theorising rather than an established effect size.

4.3 Dilution or decoupling?

Under dilution, the satisfaction–intention relationship should be similar for educators with high and low constraint; under decoupling, it should be strong for the unconstrained and weak or absent for the constrained. The interaction between satisfaction and constraint was significant in the full sample (b = 0.25, p = .015) and added 9% to the variance explained in turnover intention. As Figure 3 shows, among low-constraint educators satisfaction was strongly related to lower intention (r = −.55, p = .004; b = −0.72), close to the domestic benchmark. Among high-constraint educators there was no relationship (r = .17, p = .393; b = 0.30). The difference between the two correlations was significant (z = 2.69, p = .007).

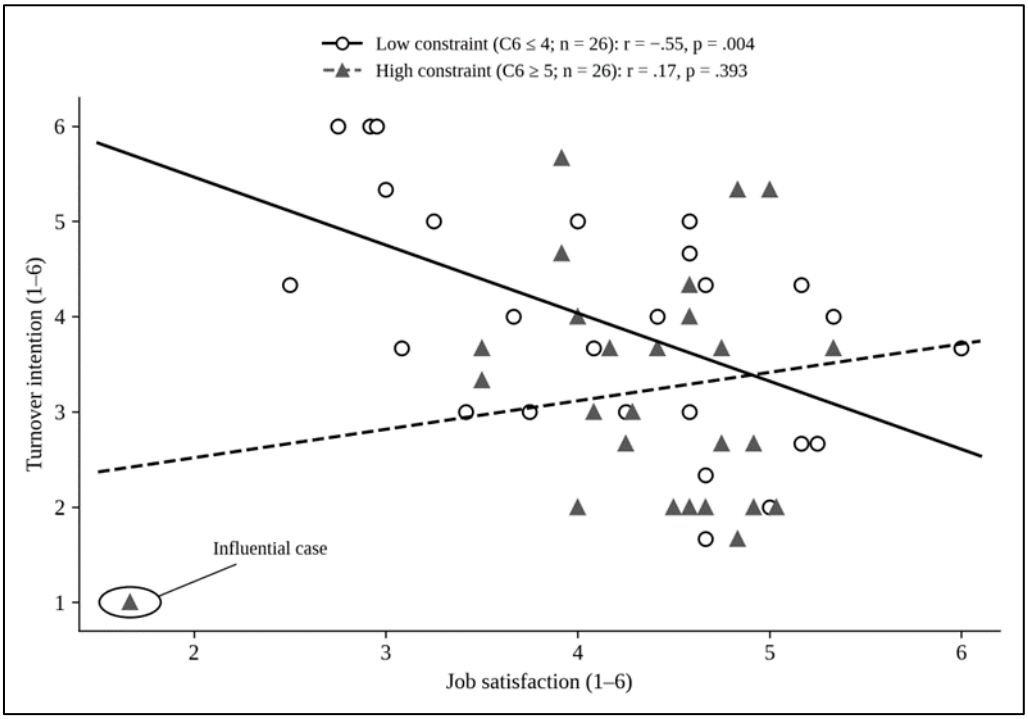


Figure 3: Job satisfaction and turnover intention among educators reporting low and high constraint (item C6). Lines are ordinary least-squares fits within each group. Coincident responses are offset slightly for visibility. The circled respondent is the influential case discussed in Section 4.4

The pattern is what the decoupling account predicts and is difficult to reconcile with pure dilution. Two further observations point the same way. Affective commitment was less closely related to intention among high-constraint educators (r = −.18) than among low-constraint educators (r = −.61), as Proposition 5 anticipates. In addition, mean turnover intention was lower among the constrained (M = 3.22 vs 3.94), although their affective commitment was, if anything, slightly higher. Constraint appeared to hold intentions down without changing how educators felt about their schools.

4.4 Robustness and alternative explanations

The most serious alternative is the influence of a single case. The influential respondent belonged to the high-constraint group. Without that respondent, the correlation in that group became −.17, the interaction term was no longer significant (b = 0.12, p = .333) and the difference between the group correlations was not significant (p = .137). The direction of the difference survived, since the relationship remained much weaker among the constrained (−.17) than among the unconstrained (−.55), but with 26 educators in each group the analysis cannot distinguish a real moderation effect from chance with any confidence.

A second alternative is range restriction. With the influential case included, satisfaction scores in the high-constraint group spanned most of the scale (SD = 0.72). Without it, their spread was about half that of the low-constraint group (SD = 0.48 vs 0.94), which would attenuate the correlation for purely statistical reasons. Corrected for this restriction, the high-constraint correlation would be approximately −.33, and the unstandardised slopes, which are not attenuated

by restriction in the predictor, differed less sharply (b = −0.42 vs −0.72; p = .408 for the high-constraint slope). Range restriction therefore accounts for part, though not all, of the group difference once the influential case is excluded.

A third alternative is measurement overlap. The constraint item belongs to the continuance subscale, which was itself related to lower intention, so the interaction might reflect a property of the scale rather than constraint as such. Against this, the two other continuance items, which concern disruption and necessity in general terms, did not produce a significant interaction with satisfaction, which suggests that the specific content of the visa, family and mobility item matters. Taken together, these analyses mean that the moderation results should be read as an illustration of how the accounts can be tested, and as weak evidence favouring decoupling, rather than as a finding.

4.5 Who is constrained?

The two groups differed in composition in one revealing respect. Educators reporting high constraint were concentrated in their first two years at the school (17 of 26), whereas educators in their third to fifth year were predominantly in the low-constraint group (14 of 19). This is consistent with constraint being strongest early, when relocation has just been paid for, children have just started at a new school and a first contract has yet to run its course, and weakening as these ties loosen. If so, the mid-tenure period in which turnover intention peaked in the wider study [4] may be, in part, the period in which constraint lifts and the dormant relationship between attitudes and intentions reasserts itself. No marked difference by region of origin was observed, although the predominance of educators from sub-Saharan Africa leaves little variation with which to detect one; passport-related visa conditions may be an important and unexamined source of constraint.

4.6 Echoes in the interview evidence

Several interviewees described being held in place by circumstances unrelated to how they felt about their schools. One, newly promoted to a role he did not enjoy, explained that his daughter needed to finish high school. Another, after eleven years in the city, noted that relocating was costlier than one might imagine and that the family's local knowledge allowed it to live on a small part of its income. A third, who described no connection to his school and was preparing to leave, planned to search carefully because he did not want to uproot his child again and his partner wished to remain in China. A fourth stayed because she had not yet found a new vacancy, and the participant who had already left observed that those who stay generally do so for family reasons. These accounts describe educators whose intentions are shaped by what their families allow and what the market offers, and whose feelings about their schools range from contentment to open detachment. They also suggest that constraint is temporary: when a child finishes school or a vacancy appears, the decoupling account predicts that intentions will realign with attitudes and that detached stayers will become leavers.

The influential survey respondent embodies the type that Proposition 5 describes, reporting among the lowest satisfaction and commitment in the sample, the strongest possible agreement that visa, family and mobility factors made leaving complicated, and the lowest possible intention to leave. A conventional reading would treat this response as anomalous; under the decoupling account it is what one would expect of a detached educator whose stated intention reflects constraint rather than attachment. One case cannot establish a type, and its statistical influence is precisely why the results above must be treated with caution, but it illustrates why, in a mobile workforce, a low intention to leave is not always good news.

4.7 Theoretical implications

The first implication is that the satisfaction–intention relationship should be treated as conditional on the ease of movement at the level of the individual as well as the market. March and Simon's formulation already implied this [5], but later models largely set it aside. A model that omits constraint may report a weak satisfaction–intention relationship and conclude, wrongly, that satisfaction matters little, when it may matter a great deal for some employees and not at all for others. The second implication is less obvious. The natural explanation for a weak link in a mobile workforce is mobility itself, yet the exploratory evidence points the other way: among educators free to move, satisfaction was as strongly related to intention as domestic theory predicts, and it was among those tied down that the link disappeared. If confirmed, the weakened link in mobile workforces is a product of heterogeneity in constraint rather than of mobility as such.

The third implication concerns turnover intention as a variable. Intention is valued because it can be measured before people leave and because it predicts departure [2]. The decoupling account suggests that its validity as an indicator of attachment varies with constraint: for constrained employees, low intention may reflect inability rather than unwillingness to leave. Researchers in mobile workforces may therefore gain by separating the intention to leave from the perceived ability to leave, for example by asking both whether respondents would leave if free to do so and whether they expect to be able to. The gap between the two answers would offer a direct index of constraint and allow detached stayers to be identified rather than inferred.

The fourth implication concerns continuance commitment. In the three-component model, continuance commitment reflects the costs of leaving, traditionally conceived as organisational investments such as pensions and seniority [11]. The constraints that matter to expatriate educators are of a different kind: they are tied to the family and the community, and resemble the community dimension of job embeddedness [6]. In the present data, continuance commitment was more strongly related to lower intention ($r = -.33$) than the meta-analytic benchmark of $-.18$ [32], yet only weakly related to satisfaction, although the low reliability of the subscale counsels caution. A cleaner approach would measure attachment, obligation and constraint separately, treating a family- and community-based constraint index as a moderator rather than as a parallel form of commitment.

The argument also bears on mediation models. In the wider study, satisfaction was related to intention only through affective commitment, an indirect-only pattern [4,33]. The decoupling account suggests that the second stage of that model, from commitment to intention, may itself depend on constraint, because attachment can restrain intention only where intention reflects choice. A full model would therefore treat constraint as a second-stage moderator, a form of moderated mediation that larger samples could test directly [34]. Finally, social exchange and psychological contract theory assume that employees can respond to the quality of the exchange, withdrawing effort, loyalty and eventually their presence when the employer breaches its obligations [15,35,36]. Withdrawal of presence, however, requires the freedom to leave. A constrained employee who experiences breach can withdraw attachment and goodwill but not, for the time being, themselves; the exchange persists on transactional rather than relational terms. Because breach also reduces performance and citizenship behaviour [36], these may be the main ways in which breach shows itself in constrained workforces in the short term. The logic extends beyond international schools to any professional labour market in which mobility is normal and constraint varies widely, such as internationally recruited nurses and doctors, academic staff on fixed-term contracts and engineers on overseas projects.

4.8 Practical implications

For school leaders, the most important step is to stop treating low turnover intention as a reliable sign of a healthy staffroom. Satisfaction surveys and measures of intention should be read together with information about constraint: a school whose staff report low intention to leave may be retaining people who want to stay or holding people who cannot yet leave, and the two require very different responses. Educators who stay because of visas or a child's schooling are likely to leave when those circumstances change, and the signs of eroding attachment are more likely to appear in effort, initiative and willingness to take on extra responsibility than in resignation letters. Such departures may become visible only when a cohort of constraints lifts together, for example at the end of a school year when several children graduate at once. Measuring attachment directly, through short items on belonging and emotional connection, is a better guide than measuring intention alone.

For governing boards and owners, the argument cautions against reading low turnover during difficult periods, such as after a change of ownership or a cut in benefits, as evidence that staff have accepted the change; educators who cannot leave immediately may simply be waiting. In practice, this suggests a different kind of contract renewal conversation, one that asks not only whether an educator intends to stay but also whether they would choose to stay if free to do so, what would make the next two years worthwhile, and whether changes such as a child's graduation lie ahead. Such conversations treat constraint as information to be understood rather than an asset to be relied upon, and allow a school to identify educators whose departure is merely deferred while there is still time to rebuild their attachment or plan for succession.

4.9 Limitations and future research

The empirical evidence rests on a small convenience sample, a single-item measure of constraint, a cross-sectional design and a dichotomised moderator, which discards information and reduces power [37]. Its key results are sensitive to one influential case and partly to restricted range in the constrained group. All measures were self-reported at a single time point, so common method variance cannot be excluded [38], and the study measured intention rather than behaviour. Educators who had already left were not surveyed; if constrained educators are over-represented among those who remain, the sample may overstate the prevalence of constraint. The benchmarks come mainly from domestic workforces in Western countries, so differences in measurement and culture may account for part of any departure from them. Finally, expatriate educators in Guangzhou are a specific population recruited through specific networks into specific kinds of school, and readers in other settings should treat the evidence as a reason to examine their own data rather than as a description of their own workforce.

Testing the propositions properly requires four things the present data lack. First, ease of movement and constraint should be measured directly and separately, with a multi-item constraint index covering visa status, a partner's employment, children's schooling, financial ties and the cost of relocation. Second, larger samples are needed to test moderation with adequate power and robustness to influential cases, and samples drawn from several cities and countries would allow dilution to be tested between markets. Third, comparing expatriate and locally hired staff in the same schools would provide a direct test of dilution. Fourth, longitudinal designs would show what happens when a

constraint lifts; the decoupling account predicts that the link between attitudes and intentions should then reappear and that detached stayers should become leavers. Table 3 summarises how each proposition could be tested.

Table 3: A research agenda for testing the propositions

Proposition	Test	Data required
P1 Dilution across markets	Compare satisfaction–intention correlations between markets with high and low ease of movement	Multi-site samples across cities or countries
P2 Dilution independent of constraint	Test whether the satisfaction × constraint interaction is negligible	Multi-item constraint index; n > 200
P3 Decoupling by constraint	Test the satisfaction × constraint interaction on intention	Multi-item constraint index; n > 200
P4 Domestic-strength link when unconstrained	Compare the unconstrained correlation with the benchmark	As for P3, with adequate subgroup power
P5 Detached stayers	Compare the commitment–intention link across constraint levels; identify low-commitment, low-intention cases	Commitment and constraint measures; follow-up of actual departures
P6 Combined effects	Model market- and individual-level effects together	Multilevel data across markets

5 CONCLUSION

The negative relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention is one of the most dependable findings in organisational research, and nothing in this study suggests that it is wrong. What the study suggests is that its strength depends on whether people are free to act on how they feel. Among expatriate educators in Guangzhou, satisfaction remained as closely tied to commitment as theory predicts, but its link with the intention to leave was weak overall, strong among educators free to move and absent among those held in place by visas, family and schooling. Although these patterns are exploratory and sensitive to a single case, they favour a decoupling account over simple dilution by mobility. If confirmed, the weakened link in mobile professional labour markets says less about the power of mobility than about the hidden power of constraint, and it warns organisations that a quiet staffroom is not necessarily a committed one.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no financial or non-financial conflict of interest.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data availability

The data are drawn from the author's Doctor of Business Administration thesis [4] and are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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