How Do We Get Them to Stay?

Exploring the Contribution of Organisational Theories to Rural Social Worker Retention within Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island

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Abstract

Social workers play an integral part in building the safety and security of vulnerable nga tangata. This vulnerability is heighted in rural communities where nga tangata experience geographical isolation and have less access to services than their urban counterparts. It is therefore essential to ensure the long-term retention of rural social workers so our most vulnerable can be supported along their journey of independence. However, there is little research on rural social worker retention in rural settings like NZ. This thesis explored the contribution and relevance of Push-Pull Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Unfolding Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, Job Characteristics Theory, and Job Demands-Resources Theory to address this literature gap in NZ. Six rural social workers and three leaders of rural social work organisations were interviewed to explore their personal perspectives of their workplace and wider community. Using qualitative, reflexive thematic analysis within a realist epistemology, transcribed interview data revealed themes of community embeddedness, work conditions, and challenges and opportunities. These findings highlighted the importance of both community and workplace embeddedness as described by Job Embeddedness Theory, yet extended on through pulls and pushes, rewards and costs, shocks and adaptability, job design, and demands and resources. Based on these findings, retention strategies should focus on building an understanding of rural social workers as individuals. Organisations can do so by understanding passions, motivations, and characteristics of their staff, which should be on an ongoing basis and not as a one-off or "tick box" exercise. Additionally, organisations must understand the large impact of the community and associated relationships on their social workers, and how personal resources may impact any associated shocks. A highlighted study limitation was that participants discussed their involvement in the study to others, which risked word spreading fast due to their residence in a rural community. Future, similar research should, therefore, include a more in-depth discussion regarding the importance of confidentiality being protected as much by the participant as the researcher, and the additional confidentiality risks from living in a rural community.

Acknowledgements

The production of this thesis is all due to my own little community.

To my partner, Marco. You have been my absolute rock; I truly do not know how I would have remained (partially) sane without you. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do for me and our fur babies. I love you.

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Approval for this research has been obtained from Massey Human Ethics Committee, Ohu Matatika 3 [OM3 24/15].

Preface

The idea for this thesis came as a result of my move from urban life to a rural community in 2021. The differences between communities were stark, and it took time for me to adjust to my surroundings. However, I soon became encapsulated in the environment and slower pace of my new town. At this time, I was working for a health employment agency, and was regularly finding advertisements for local, registered practitioners. This got me thinking about their long-term retention in rural communities, and the part rural-urban differences had to play. My later employment in a rural social work organisation helped to specify the direction in which I could take my research.

Social worker retention is a long-standing global issue. In NZ, there is an acute shortage of social workers in rural regions in particular (Social Services Providers Aotearoa [SSPA], 2019). Because of their valuable mahi within arguably the most vulnerable communities, it is essential to understand rural social worker retention. However, this knowledge cannot be developed from studies in urban communities, due to the large rural-urban differences which will be spoken of in this thesis. Thus, it is important to focus research solely on rural social workers and their surrounding relationships and environments. This is what this thesis sets out to do.

As I am exploring multiple theories on an under researched topic, I have chosen to forgo an introduction. Instead, I will detail each theory individually, including their assumptions and then imposing these over previous, related research. I will then explain the why and how for my selected interview method, before analysing my results within each theory's assumptions and suggesting retention strategies based on my findings. I hope this thesis accurately portrays participant voices, drawing attention to the highs and lows of working for a rural social work organisation to better understand their retention. In doing so, I also hope this thesis opens the door to understanding how to better support NZ rural social workers to continue doing their valuable mahi.

Glossary

Employee retention	Workers staying in their jobs long-term.
Hauora	Health and wellbeing.
Kiritaki	Client, customer. Will refer to clients of social work organisations for the purpose of this thesis.
Leaders	Leaders and managers of registered practitioners.
Multiple relationships	A person holding two or more roles in their workplace and/or community. For the purpose of this thesis, the term will be used interchangeably with dual relationships.
Nga tangata	A group of people. Will refer to residents, i.e. rural nga tangata, for the purpose of this thesis.
Organisational politics	Conflicting interests among employees and leaders of all levels.

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Chapter 1

Thesis Question and Critical Literature Review

Thesis Question

Vulnerable communities worldwide depend on social work professionals to help protect their health and wellbeing (Payne, 2006). It is thereby vital to have qualified workers to fill and stay in these positions, which requires understanding from research on the psychology of organisational retention. Two main types of settings exist for social work: rural and urban. Most of the research on employee retention in this profession is confined to urban settings, which are not necessarily comparable to rural life and needs (George et al., 2019). In particular, there is very little research pertaining to social work in rural communities within pastoral countries like Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ; Maidment, 2020; Pitt, 2016). Furthermore, the little research that does tends to focus on social worker education (Kim, 2024; Nash & Munford, 2001) or supervision (Beddoe et al., 2020; O'Donoghue, 2022) rather than employee retention. With resident vulnerability, i.e. susceptibility to harm, being high in rural areas (Blattner et al., 2020; Fahs, 2017) and low rural social worker numbers nationwide in NZ (Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2024), it is important to address this gap in our understanding of rural social worker retention in NZ. The thesis question is, therefore, "how do organisational psychology theories contribute to the retention of social workers in rural communities of NZ's, predominantly rural, South Island?"

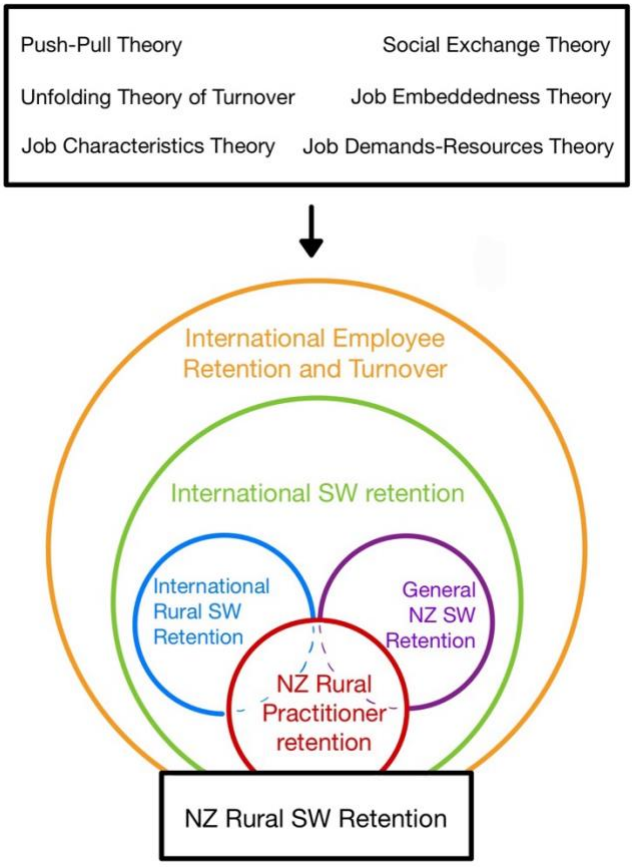
Critical Literature Review

Worker retention is a generic issue that has been studied in Organisational Psychology. Organisational Psychology seeks to explore workplace behaviours such as wellbeing, mobility and the ageing workforce (Duarte, 2017). This makes it is a highly relevant field of study to address the literature gap and associated thesis question. However, international literature has also confirmed the importance of the community in rural worker (Cosgrave et al., 2019) rural social worker (Schneck, 2004), and NZ rural allied health professional (George, 2023) turnover and retention. Thus, theories have been selected based on their assumptions within the workplace and community contexts. As such, Push-Pull Theory,

Social Exchange Theory, the Unfolding Theory of Turnover, Job Embeddedness Theory, Job Characteristics Theory, and Job Demands-Resources Theory have been selected. These theories will be defined, then explored in terms of prior studies on employee retention and turnover, social worker retention, and rural social worker retention (Figure 1). As there are no studies encompassing rural social worker retention within NZ as far as I am aware, the literature review will instead include NZ rural practitioner studies focused on a sole profession, e.g. nurse practitioners, to address the literature gap (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Roadmap to Critical Literature Review



Push-Pull Theory

Push-Pull Theory has different applications for different contexts, but focuses on the net balance of a *push* away from a workplace or community vs a *pull* towards a workplace or community (Lee, 1966; McAuley et al., 2006). Across the theories, pushes and pulls each

have a weight assigned to them, which is determined by the individual (Lee, 1966). For example, an individual with health issues may place a higher value on hospital accessibility than an individual who does not have health issues. For another example, one employee may place higher value on workplace autonomy than another. Push-Pull Theory is particularly relevant to the current study as it offers a motivational perspective on the net pushes and pulls a rural social worker may experience in both the workplace and community contexts.

Because both the workplace and community have been determined as essential in answering the thesis question, both McCauley et al.'s (2006) and Lee's (1966) theories will represent a broader Push-Pull Theory as described in this thesis. In the workplace setting, McAuley et al. (2006) utilised Push-Pull Theory to study 622 varying professional workers in the United States (Figure 1). McAuley et al. defined professional workers as those that belonged to a professional, occupational community, including nurses and accountants, and not to "semi-skilled" work, such as hospitality. Social workers fit their definition of professional, which makes their findings relevant to the current study. Rather than a pull towards a job, McCauley et al. (2006) defined a pull as what determined their participants to *stay* in their workplace. This definition is important and makes their findings relevant to the current study on retention, and not recruitment. Alternatively, in the community setting, Lee's Push Pull Theory of Migration (1966) varies in that there are negative push factors, positive pull factors, and additional *neutral* factors which have no impact on the decision of the individual. As Lee's theory is perceived as universally transferrable, such neutral factors are also likely to be experienced by NZ rural social workers.

As community pushes and pulls are more generalisable, they will be discussed first. Using semi-structured interviews on eight domestic practitioners, including social workers, and fifteen international migrants in rural Alentejo, Portugal, Diogo (2024) found that pull factors included quality of life, and material, social, and political factors. Diogo also found that having multiple factors pulling an individual to a community would make it more likely for them to stay long-term, yet the geographical isolation associated with living in a rural community was a large push (2024). In NZ, funding for social services comes from national government, which suggests it is tied to the political factors determined by Diogo (2024). However, the Social Services Providers Association (SSPA) has determined that rural social work organisations often lack funding because models do not consider their unique

circumstances, such as poverty and lack of public transport (2019). As such, political factors may serve as a push to NZ rural social workers. Because only a small number of participants were included, and being based in Portugal, it is important to keep in mind that Diogo's (2024) findings may not be transferrable to wider migration pushes and pulls in NZ. Yet, should Diogo's (2024) findings and Push-Pull Theory be relevant to the thesis question, we might expect participants to discuss pull factors such as salary and home affordability (material), whānau (social), and access to nature (quality of life). We might also expect participants to view the geographical isolation negatively and thus view it as a push alongside political factors. These will each combine to form net pushes and net pulls, with the pulls of those who are happy in their community outweighing pushes, or vice versa for those unhappy.

Push-Pull Theory will now be used to interpret social worker retention literature (Figure 1). Evans and Huxley (2009) found that consensus from surveys of 998 senior social workers in Wales was that, while they had high levels of job satisfaction, they also had high workloads and did not feel financially valued or organisationally supported for their work. Following the assumptions of Push-Pull Theory, job satisfaction could be viewed as a pull to stay employed in the workplace, with workloads and not feeling valued being pushes. The findings further suggest that these social workers viewed organisational support and appropriate pay for work as pulls. This evidence is relevant to the thesis questions, where such support would join the pull of job satisfaction and thus contribute to net pulls outweighing pushes, for the social worker to stay in their employment. Should this evidence and theory be valid in the current study, we might expect to see participants who are happy in their role positively discuss pulls of job satisfaction and organisational support more frequently than pushes of high workload and lower pay.

Evans and Huxley's (2009) findings also align with rural social worker literature (Figure 1). For example, Landsman and Rathman (2022) conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews to research social work regulation across urban and rural Iowa. From 652 social workers, employer agencies, and stakeholders familiar with local practice hiring issues, they determined that social workers in rural Iowa had higher job satisfaction and organisational commitment than social workers in urban Iowa. Additionally, Landsman and Rathman (2022) found that rural social workers often earned less than their urban counterparts. However, they

were more likely to stay with their organisation if they were provided supervision to help manage workloads, and had rural familiarity and local whānau connection. As Push-Pull Theory assumes that net pulls must outweigh pushes for the employee to stay, it can be argued that rural Iowa social workers view job satisfaction, rural familiarity, and whānau connection as pulls, which outweigh the push of lower pay. Their additional pushes include high workload and irregular supervision, which if experienced could contribute to net pushes outweighing pulls, and thus resulting in voluntary turnover. Thus, the evidence and theory is relevant to the thesis question. Should the same be true in the current study, we might expect irregular supervision to be an additional push experienced by participants, which may contribute to net pushes outweighing pulls and the contemplation of voluntary turnover.

Within NZ rural practitioner research, Kearns et al. (2006) utilised interviews to understand what pulled nine overseas-trained doctors to stay in their rural communities (Figure 1). They found that the relaxed lifestyle, natural environment, and continuity of care to patients served as pulls. However, Kearns et al. (2006) also identified negative participant views resulting from lack of activities, spousal careers, funding, and physical isolation in their rural communities. Following the assumptions of Push-Pull Theory, these factors would be labelled as pushes. All identified pushes and pulls are relevant to NZ rural social workers as they mostly relate to the community than the workplace. Additionally, continuity of care can also be associated with the generalised work required of social workers in rural communities as mentioned by Landsman and Rathman (2022). We are also more likely to find similar results in the current study due to it being conducted in the same cultural context as Kearns et al. (2006), i.e., rural NZ. Therefore, we might expect participants to describe the local connection and lifestyle provided by their rural community as pulls to stay. We could also expect participants to note that there is physical isolation and a lack of opportunities for themselves and their whānau, which we could associate to pushes away from their rural community.

To summarise, if Push-Pull Theory is relevant in the current study, we will see work and community positives outweighing negatives for participants happy in their job. This evidence would equate to their pulls outweighing their pushes. It is important to note that Push-Pull Theory combines all pushes and all pulls for a net outcome, meaning we will see tension between community pulls and economic pushes factoring into a participant's decision to stay

or leave, for example. Should net pulls outweigh pushes, participants will be likely to stay with their organisation, thus resulting in their retention. Alternatively, for those unhappy in their job, we will see work and community negatives outweighing positives, equating to net pushes outweighing net pulls. These participants will be more likely to leave their organisation and thus result in their voluntary turnover. Potential work pushes have been highlighted as high workload, irregular supervision, and low perceived pay, while potential community pushes may be isolation and limited local opportunities. Potential work pulls have been highlighted as job satisfaction and organisational support, while potential community pulls may be whānau connection, home affordability, and enjoyment of the local area. However, as Push-Pull Theory has not previously been applied to NZ rural social work, it is important to note that pushes and pulls may fall outside of what has been mentioned. Another limitation comes from the theory not discussing social relationships that participants may be a part of. To answer the thesis question more holistically, these must be explored by a theory that acknowledges their interactions within both workplace and community contexts.

Social Exchange Theory

A suitable theory to explore such relationships is Social Exchange Theory. It has had many adaptations over different contexts (see Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Blau, 1964), and focuses on more transactional exchanges rather than loyalties to place. Social Exchange Theory assumes that in a transactional exchange between two parties, an individual is motivated by what they receive for what they give. Thus, the two strike a bargain of sorts where both can maximise their rewards and minimise their costs, upholding perceived fairness and reciprocity (Homans, 1961). For an employee and their organisation, reciprocity can refer to the psychological contract that outlines an ongoing transactional exchange prior to the employee starting work (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). This contract includes the expectations of both organisation and employee, and, when used to investigate retention, is one-sided from the employee's point of view. For example, the employee will receive a salary and benefits, rewards, by providing their skills, knowledge and time, costs. If the employee feels the psychological contract is fulfilled, i.e. their rewards are high compared to their costs, then they will determine there is a positive transactional exchange and be more likely to stay in their job. If they feel the psychological contract is not being fulfilled, i.e. their costs are high compared to their rewards, then they will determine there is a negative transactional exchange and be more likely to voluntarily leave. As such,

Social Exchange Theory is appropriate to include when addressing the thesis question surrounding NZ rural social worker retention.

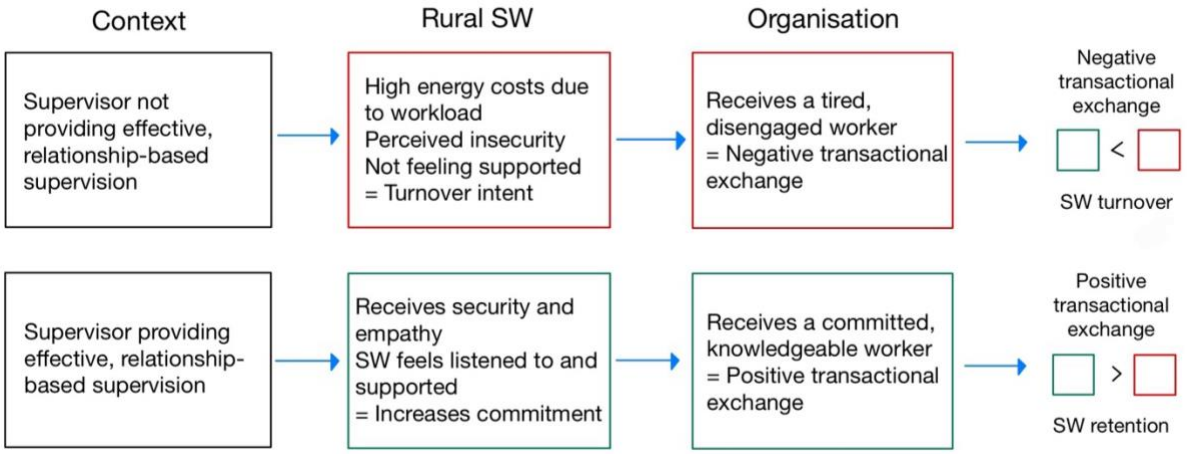
Exploring international employee retention (Figure 1), Harden et al. (2018) surveyed 800 United States IT professionals to understand organisational commitment and turnover intent through Social Exchange Theory. They found that the increased time and effort associated with high workloads were viewed as additional costs that resulted in employee turnover intent. Additionally, when rewards of pay and recognition were perceived as fair for the work completed, participants were more committed to their organisation and thus more likely to stay. This evidence is directly relevant to the thesis question, as it supports Social Exchange Theory's assumptions that when rewards are upheld the psychological contract between employee and organisation, the employee is more likely to stay. As such, should these results carry over to the current study, we might expect to see participants with high workload to be considering leaving their workplace, thus experiencing maximised costs above what was agreed upon in their psychological contract. Likewise, we could expect participants who believe their organisation is upholding their psychological contract to be happy in their role, resulting in their long-term retention.

This psychological contract can also be found within general social worker retention literature (Figure 1). For example, from an ethnographic case study of 30 English child welfare social workers investigating supervision and retention, Warwick et al. (2023) found that social workers felt more supported when their supervisors portrayed empathy, security, and active listening. Warwick et al. (2023) presented a sole social worker who initially stated turnover intent. Then, after their supervisor tailored their supervision style to one of effective support, the social worker decided to stay, despite experiencing the same workload and home-life pressure. Professional supervision is a requirement of NZ social work (Australia New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2023), and thus will be included in the psychological contract set out prior to them starting employment. As such, if we were to interpret Warwick et al.'s (2023) results using Social Exchange Theory, the time and energy costs associated with a high workload initially outweighed the rewards agreed to in the psychological contract. This then led to a negative transactional exchange between employee and organisation, where the employee voiced turnover intent. However, when the supervisor

provided effective, relationship-based supervision, the psychological contract was upheld for a positive transactional exchange. This caused the social worker to be more committed to their organisation and thus resulted in their retention, which supports the relevance of Social Exchange Theory to the current study. This evidence is highly relevant to the thesis question as it demonstrates the impact a psychological contract can have on social worker retention. Should Warwick et al.'s (2023) findings also be validated in the current study, we might expect participants who receive effective supervision to be committed to their work and thus more likely to stay long-term (Figure 2). Additionally, we might expect participants who do not receive effective supervision, to have high energy costs from workload that outweigh rewards, to result in consideration of voluntary turnover (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Potential Costs and Rewards in a Rural Social Worker-Organisation Exchange, based on Effective Supervision



Note. This diagram has adapted Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1961) to fit the context of NZ rural social worker retention.

Similarly to Warwick et al. (2023), Nickson et al. (2016) explored the impact of peer supervision on rural social workers in Australia (Figure 1). For their mixed-methods approach, 20 remote and rural social workers participated in virtual peer supervision[1], focus

[1] Collaborative supervision conducted in a group environment.

groups, sole interviews, and surveys. Nickson et al. (2016) found that low frequency of supervision was a cost of working rurally. However, it was balanced by the provision of virtual peer supervision, providing the organisation also valued this method. Using Social Exchange Theory to interpret these results, participant costs were increased because they were not initially provided frequent supervision. These then outweighed perceived rewards and resulted in turnover intent. When participant organisations supported access to additional and virtual peer supervision, the costs resulting from infrequent supervision decreased and participants became more likely to stay in their job. This evidence supports the relevance of Social Exchange Theory to the thesis question by showing that the psychological contract between social worker and organisation determines rural social worker retention and turnover. Should Nickson et al.'s (2016) findings be valid in the current study, we might expect participants who do not receive frequent, effective supervision to have higher costs and associated turnover intent (Figure 2). Additionally, those who are employed in an organisation that is supportive of effective supervision will perceive their psychological contract as being met and thus have an increased likelihood of retention.

Effective supervision in NZ and Australia includes the requirement of fortnightly minimum for sessions (Australia and New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2023). Thus, the current study has the same specified frequency as Nickson et al. (2016). However, from surveying 119 newly qualified NZ social workers to measure professional support, Beddoe et al. (2020) found that roughly half were not receiving the required fortnightly minimum. Following the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory, not meeting this minimum therefore resulted in a broken psychological contract for the social workers. This finding can be amplified in a rural community which has lower access to supervision, as found by Nickson et al. (2016). Thus, the evidence from Beddoe et al.'s (2020) study is relevant to the thesis question. Should this evidence and theory be valid in the current study, we might expect participants who have infrequent supervision to have higher associated costs. These costs would contribute to a negative transactional exchange between social worker and organisation, and decrease the likelihood of their retention.

Beddoe et al. (2020) also found that participants valued external supervision over internal, as it enabled them to avoid supervision with staff members who held multiple roles within their organisation. Multiple roles, or dual relationships are perceived as unavoidable within rural

communities, with rural social workers advised to work with them rather than against (Bosh & Boisen, 2011; Brownlee et al., 2012; Pugh & Cheers, 2010). As such, the energy required to mitigate these relationships can be viewed as a maximising of costs, which can contribute to an overall negative transactional exchange. Thus the evidence from Beddoe et al.'s (2020) study becomes relevant to the thesis question. NZ rural practitioner research confirms the challenge of dual relationships in the community sense, with Daellenbach et al. (2020) finding that personal connections to clients, or kiritaki, were common among their surveyed and focus group of 157 rural midwife participants. However, Daellenbach et al. (2020) also noted that passion, community connectedness, and skill variety could balance such relationships. Following the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory, a positive transactional exchange would still be maintained for the midwives if these factors were present, providing their rewards outweigh their costs. The evidence from Daellenbach et al. (2020) is also relevant to the thesis question as rural social workers can experience multiple relationships in the community due to heightened social visibility (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). Thus, if the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory were similarly met in the current study, we could expect participant rewards from passion, community connectedness and skill variety to outweigh participant costs from managing multiple relationships. Here, the organisational reward of retention would be maintained for a positive transactional exchange.

In summary, key signs that Social Exchange Theory contributed to the current study would be participants referencing additional costs resulted from high workload, infrequent supervision, and multiple relationship management. Those with maximised costs compared to their rewards of benefits and pay would further demonstrate a negative transactional exchange, and they would discuss their turnover intent. Alternatively, participants might discuss rewards of organisational support, career advancement, effective supervision, passion, community connectedness and skill variety which could help to outweigh costs, thus contributing to a positive transactional exchange and their related retention. This would be evidence of a fulfilled psychological contract, where rewards are maximised and costs are minimised. A limitation of Social Exchange Theory in the context of the current study, however, is that it does not take into consideration the complexities of the environment in which rural social workers live and practice. This is because it only focuses on subjective opinions of the participants, rather than underlying environmental factors. For example, it does not include costs of geographical isolation or resource constraints, which are commonly

experienced in rural social work organisations (Pugh & Cheers, 2010; SSPA, 2019). Therefore, on its own, Social Exchange Theory is not holistic enough to address the literature gap. It must be used in conjunction with further theories to ensure a broader understanding of NZ rural social worker retention.

Unfolding Theory of Turnover

Unlike Social Exchange Theory and Push-Pull Theory, the Unfolding Theory of Turnover (Unfolding Theory) was explicitly created for the workplace context. It posits that there are four paths an employee can follow to voluntarily leave their workplace (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Paths 1, 2 and 3 are the decision paths that follow an experience of a workplace or community shock, while Paths 4A and 4B result from a decrease in perceived current or future job satisfaction. An additional factor in Paths 2, 3, 4A and 4B is image violation. There are three types of images an employee must maintain to stay in their organisation: value, or personal principles; trajectory, or personal goals; and strategic, or goal-oriented action plans (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). For example, a rural social worker value image may be that kiritaki should all be supported using equitable practice; a trajectory image may be to uphold work-life balance; and a strategic image may be to avoid the local supermarket, when possible, to mitigate potential run-ins and maintain professional boundaries. If any one of these images is not upheld, and the employee does not then change their image to re-align within the relevant context, the employee will voluntarily leave their job, and retention will not be maintained.

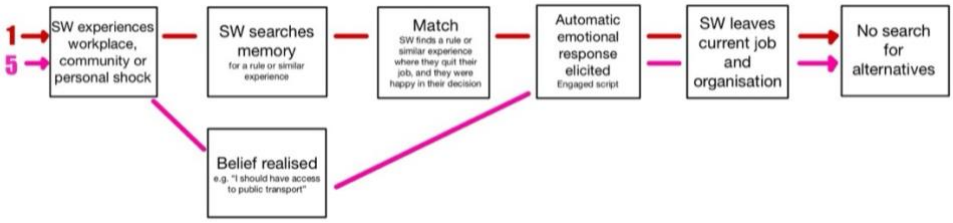
Unfolding Theory has been tested in various workplaces to address employee turnover, which has mostly confirmed its theoretical assumptions (Figure 1). For example, in a recent meta-analysis investigating turnover, Rubenstein et al. (2017) reported confirmation of Paths 1 and 2, with limited support of Path 3 and no mention of Paths 4A or 4B. This evidence indicates that shocks play a large role in turnover and can therefore be viewed as more likely to impact NZ rural social worker retention compared to general dissatisfaction. However, a limitation of this meta-analysis in the context of the current study is that it does not solely focus on Unfolding Theory. One study which did, involved creation of an exit survey for 107 United States IT professionals and found that the theory was 81% validated (Tellez, 2014). Results further demonstrated that Path 3 was the most common and Path 4B was not followed by participants. The lack of general dissatisfaction aligns with Rubenstein et al. (2017) and further suggests shocks will be found relevant in addressing the thesis question. Should the

findings from both Rubenstein et al. (2017) and Tellez (2014) be valid in the current study, we would expect participants to discuss turnover in relation to a workplace or community shock, i.e. Paths 1, 2, or 3, rather than general dissatisfaction, i.e. Paths 4A or 4B.

More specific to the current study, Wu and Chen (2022) tested Unfolding Theory by interviewing 17 social workers in China (Figure 1). They found that their participants also did not follow Paths 4A and 4B, but that a sixth path (Path 5) was introduced. This path was the same as Path 1, but rather driven by a belief instead of a rule or prior experience of a shock. In the context of NZ rural social work, social workers may express a belief that resulted in prior turnover or demonstrate the following of Path 5 (Figure 3). While the sample size is particularly small, the findings of Wu and Chen (2022) suggest that we are unlikely to see turnover resulting from participant dissatisfaction. Therefore, addressing shocks again becomes important when addressing the thesis question. Should Unfolding Theory contribute in a similar way to the current study, we could expect participants to discuss both shocks and belief that led to prior turnover or the following of Path 5.

Figure 3

Paths 1 and 5 in a Rural Social Work Context



Note. The content of this model was adapted from Lee and Mitchell (1994, p. 60) and Wu and Chen (2022, p. 121), while the layout was adapted from Mourmant (2009, p. 147).

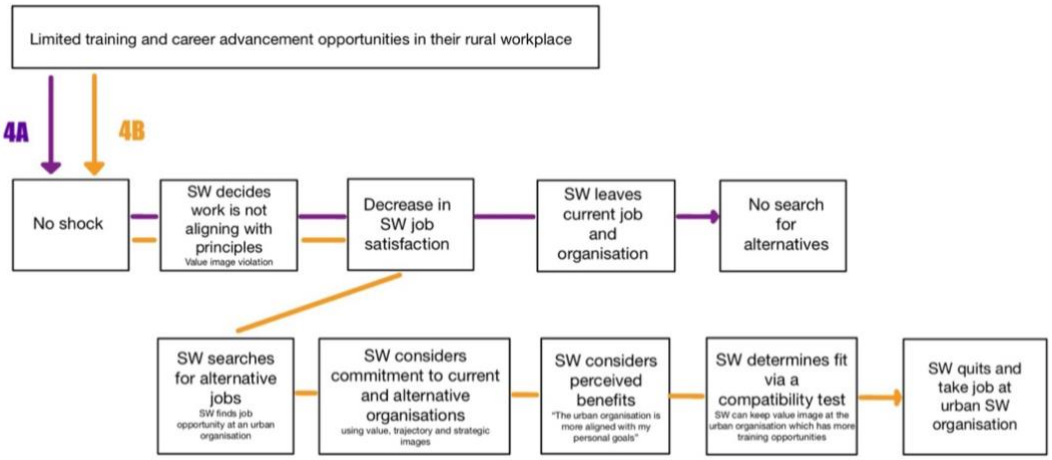
While there is a common pattern among the above literature that shocks will result in turnover, a more recent assumption of Unfolding Theory is that these shocks can be adapted to (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). This ability can positively contribute to retention. For example, a participant of Wu and Chen (2022) resigned due to the shock of kiritaki approaching them outside of work hours, as it stopped them from maintaining a work-life balance. This shock is highly relevant to the current study, as rural nga tangata have been

found to experience heightened social visibility (Pugh & Cheers, 2010), which is likely to result in more frequent interaction with kiritaki outside of work hours. As such, if a rural social worker did not complete Paths 1, 2, 3 or 5 after they were approached outside of work hours, they could adapt to this shock and remain employed in their organisation. However, it is also important to note that adaptation strategies differ between individuals (Aldasheva, 2014). This means that all rural social workers may not adapt to such interaction, and thus complete Paths 1, 2, 3 or 5 when approached by kiritaki to result in their voluntary turnover. These findings that have evidenced social worker adaptability are therefore critical considerations when answering the thesis question. Should Unfolding Theory contribute to the current study in a similar way, we might expect to see participants have different perceptions of shocks, with varying levels of methods and levels of adaptability.

The overall findings of Wu & Chen (2022), Rubenstein et al. (2017) and Tellez (2014) where shocks were more likely to result in employee turnover than general dissatisfaction, could be challenged by international rural social worker retention literature (Figure 1). For example, Brown et al. (2017) found in their systematic literature review that poor job satisfaction and limited training and career advancement opportunities increased voluntary turnover of rural social workers in the United States. This evidence determined that general dissatisfaction led to turnover, which is limited to the following of Paths 4A and 4B in Unfolding Theory (Figure 4). Thus, the evidence and theory are relevant to the thesis question, where participants who have job satisfaction, training, and career advancement opportunities will be more likely to stay with their organisation. Should the evidence be valid in the current study, we might expect participants to experience dissatisfaction which has caused them to follow Paths 4A and 4B as mentioned in Unfolding Theory.

Figure 4

Paths 4A and 4B in a Rural Social Work Context



Note. The content of this model was adapted from Lee and Mitchell (1994, p. 60), while the layout was adapted from Mourmant (2009, p. 147).

NZ rural practitioner research also indirectly supports the prediction that Paths 4A and 4B could be followed in the current study (Figure 1). For example, when Adams and Carryer's (2019) investigated how to develop the NZ nurse practitioner workforce, they conducted an ethnographic study on 13 current and 4 future rural registered nurse-to-nurse practitioner participants. It was found that participants experienced inadequate funding support, which resulted in participant frustration and dissatisfaction. This evidence can be directly related to general dissatisfaction in Unfolding Theory, which Paths 4A and 4B begin from. Additionally, many participants stated that their organisations did not utilise them as a nurse practitioner once they had earned their degree (Adams & Carryer, 2019). This evidence can correlate to a workplace shock, where participants were expecting to be employed as a nurse practitioner post qualification, yet were not given the opportunity. As such, according to Unfolding Theory, Paths 1, 2, and 3, or Wu and Chen's Path 5 (2022), will begin. However, because the study does not explore retention or turnover, the paths cannot be viewed as completed. This evidence neither confirmed nor denied the application of Unfolding Theory, although it did demonstrate that both shocks and dissatisfaction are important considerations when addressing development and retention of NZ rural nurse practitioners. Thus, the evidence and theory stay relevant to answering the thesis question, where inadequate funding support and recognition may result in workplace dissatisfaction and shocks with a higher

chance of voluntary turnover. Should the evidence be valid in the current study, we could expect participants who do not receive adequate funding support or recognition to be in the process of following any of the five paths within Unfolding Theory.

It has now been determined that Unfolding Theory is relevant to answering the thesis question. Key signs of the contribution of Unfolding Theory would be participants being observed to follow any of the five paths, initiated by both workplace and community shocks (Paths 1, 2, 3 and 5) and dissatisfaction (Paths 4A and 4B). Further signs of its contribution would be participants demonstrating adaptability to shocks. This would result in them staying in their job for longer and this positively impact their retention. However, while Unfolding Theory provides a detailed summary of potential paths, it is limited in the current study as its direct focus is turnover. As it can only be assumed that the absence of, or adaptability to, shocks and dissatisfaction will result in retention, it is important that further theories specifically exploring retention are included. Only this way can the thesis question be best answered.

Job Embeddedness Theory

Unfolding Theory has a sister theory, which may provide a more holistic understanding of employee retention. Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001; Mitchell & Lee, 2001; Lee et al., 2004) was initially created by the same researchers as Unfolding Theory to extend knowledge on employee turnover. It assumes that both on-the-job and off-the-job factors of social links and fit within the surrounding environment are what ties the employee to their work. On-the-job and off-the-job sacrifice is the third and final factor, which is defined as what the employee would be psychologically and materially sacrificing by leaving (Mitchell et al., 2001). These three factors together are assumed to increase the embeddedness of an employee and thus mitigate their turnover intent. The theory has more recently been associated with employee retention (Fan et al., 2024; Holtom & Darabi, 2018), which makes its inclusion directly relevant to the thesis question and addressing the literature gap.

Previous theoretical applications in the general workforce have confirmed that the number of links and fit increase job embeddedness and decrease the risk of turnover (Figure 1). For example, Holmes et al. (2013) interviewed 18 United States human resource practitioners for

their perceptions of job embeddedness and argued that team links and shared values were found to keep them in their jobs. This evidence is directly relevant to the thesis question, where team links and shared values can increase NZ rural social worker retention. Social work literature also supported this finding (Figure 1). For example Burns et al. (2020) completed a 10-year longitudinal study of 19 social workers in Ireland to explore reasons behind embeddedness and staying in their organisation. They found that participants built strong team connections and knowledge if they stayed in an organisation for five years or more, and were less likely to sacrifice these on-the-job factors (Burns et al., 2020). The variation in study method between Holmes et al. (2013), short-term, and Burns et al. (2020), long-term, enforces the importance of on-the-job links and fit as determined by Job Embeddedness Theory. As such, it is highly likely the findings of Holmes et al. (2013) and Burns et al. (2020) will contribute to the thesis question in the same fashion. We might, therefore, expect to identify themes of high workplace connections, shared values and sacrifice in participants who have been employed in their rural social work organisation for some time.

Rural social worker research is slightly different from that of Burns et al. (2020), as it focuses more on off-the-job embeddedness. For example, community findings from Brown et al. (2017) demonstrated that rural social worker retention increased when participants had a connection to, or felt their personal values aligned with, their surrounding community. These connection and values can be associated with off-the-job fit as determined by Job Embeddedness Theory. Landsman and Rathman (2022) came to a similar conclusion, stating that familiarity and whānau connection improved rural social worker retention. Familiarity was viewed as connection, which can be associated with off-the-job fit. Additionally, whānau connection can be labelled as off-the-job links, which would be sacrificed if the employee moved away. Landsman and Rathman (2022) also argued that it took a certain type of person to enjoy rural life. Following the assumptions of Job Embeddedness Theory, this can be associated with off-the-job fit where the individual is compatible with their environment. Both the evidence from Landsman and Rathman (2022) and Brown et al. (2017) is transferrable to the rural social worker population due to the universal connections obtained from whānau and the community. Thus, this evidence and Job Embeddedness Theory are relevant to the thesis question, as they support that off-the-job embeddedness assists in long term retention. If similar findings were identified in the current study, we could expect

participants who were happy in their role and community to positively discuss their off-the-job whānau relationships, familiarity, and values.

NZ rural practitioner literature also supports that community is important in retention (Figure 1). For example, Kearns et al. specifically argued the importance of place in retention (2006; Push-Pull Theory). Similarly, Smith (2013) argued in their article that it was very important to be visible in, and belong to, the community, if one wanted to practice rural social work in NZ. These findings demonstrate the value of off-the-job embeddedness as mentioned in Job Embeddedness Theory, particularly off-the-job fit which visibility and belonging contribute to. The evidence from both Kearns et al. (2006) and Smith (2013) are also specific to the NZ context. Thus, the importance of off-the-job links and fit can further be considered relevant to the current study and thesis question. However, it is important to keep in mind that Kearns et al. (2006) focused on overseas participants, while Smith (2013) is speaking from personal experience. These contexts suggest that, while whānau connection, i.e. off-the-job links, and belonging, i.e. off-the-job fit, are important, they may vary due to the individual background and values of the rural social worker. As such, should similar findings be identified in the current study, we could expect participants to have varying opinions on off-the-job links, fit, and sacrifice.

While links and fit have been the main discussion points so far, on-the-job and off-the-job sacrifice also impacts the embeddedness of an individual. Job Embeddedness Theory assumes that the more on-the-job and off-the-job links and fit that an employee has, the more they must sacrifice should they leave (Lee et al., 2004). This sacrifice can also include material and psychological costs that the employee would lose by moving (Lee et al., 2004). For example, as stated by Diogo (2024), homes are often more affordable and overall quality of life is higher in rural areas. Keeping this in mind, off-the-job sacrifice may be a large consideration in the current study and thus be relevant in answering the thesis question. As such, we could expect participants to discuss what they would be giving up in terms of workplace or community contexts should they move away, for example, the ability to buy a home or a better quality of life.

To summarise, key findings of the contribution of Job Embeddedness Theory to NZ rural social worker retention are expected to derive from both on-the-job and off-the-job contexts.

We could expect to see common mention of team and whānau relationships (links) and shared workplace and community values (fit) for participants who are happy in their role. Participants may also discuss sacrifice in terms of the community, for example, leaving an area where they could afford to buy a home, to an urban city where homes are less affordable. Unlike Push-Pull Theory and Social Exchange Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory does not take into consideration any negative factors for a net balance. However, its place in retention literature has been cemented, making it a relevant theory for the current study. The theory focusing on both workplace and community contexts will also illustrate the positives of working and living long-term in a rural community, which will be important to address in retention strategies in Chapter 4.

Job Characteristics Theory

Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Hackman & Oldham, 1980) is vastly different from the above theories, as it focuses solely on job design. Firstly, it assumes that all jobs have the core characteristics of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback in varying levels, which can be individually tailored to suit the individual needs of the employee (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Job Characteristics Theory then assumes these five characteristics lead to three psychological employee states of experienced job meaningfulness, experienced responsibility, and knowledge of work results for the employee. The final assumption is that through these three psychological states, the five core characteristics result in the positive work outcomes of motivation, satisfaction, performance, low absenteeism, and low turnover. Job Characteristics Theory provides an understanding of the factors within the jobs that keep an employee in place. As such, it could be an influential theory in addressing the thesis question.

In a recent application of Job Characteristics Theory, Astakhova et al. (2024) surveyed 623 participants in varying fields across the United States (Figure 1). They found that passion could be identified as a sixth work outcome, providing that the core characteristics also led to experienced meaningfulness (Figure 5). Astakhova et al. (2024) then further separated passion into two categories: harmonious (work is interesting and challenging) and obsessive (built from internal pressure). Passion, meaningfulness, and social work have been closely related to social work (see Bent-Goodley, 2014; Keenan, 2018; Scales & Brown, 2020), making Astakhova et al.'s (2024) contributions relevant to answering the thesis question.

Therefore, should Job Characteristics Theory contribute to rural social worker retention, it would be highly likely for themes of both harmonious and obsessive passion to also be identified among participant data.

Figure 5

Job Characteristics Theory with Astakhova et al.'s Sixth Work Outcome

Note. The content of this figure has been taken from Hackman and Oldham (1976, p. 256) and is subject to copyright.

Both the assumptions of Job Characteristics Theory and Astakhova et al.'s (2024) argument can be imposed over social worker retention literature (Figure 1). For example, in the previous case study by Warwick et al. (2023), it is demonstrated that feedback tailored to the social worker improved their knowledge of work results and overturned their turnover intention (Figure 3). This evidence explicitly demonstrates tailored feedback resulting in low turnover. In another study, Kan and Klu (2023) explored how China's recent government purchase of social services affected rural social workers using field visits and interviews with 7 social workers and 20 villagers. It was found that rural social workers had autonomy, which allowed them to prioritise tasks that supported their communities and personal interests. They also perceived they would be unable to perform their generalist role under the new policies, inhibiting the significant and meaningful work they were completing. Using Job Characteristics Theory to interpret this evidence, prior to the government purchase, participants were viewed to have autonomy and skill variety, which led to the psychological states of meaningful work and experienced responsibility, and the six work outcomes (Figure 3). Thus, the evidence and theory is relevant to the thesis question, where rural social workers value the autonomy and skill variety provided. Should this evidence be valid in the current

study, we might expect participants to value feedback and skill variety, and discuss the five key work outcomes in their work. If they perceived there to be high levels of each, then they would be more likely to stay employed in their organisation.

Like Kan and Klu (2023), Adams and Carryer (2019) found that current and future rural nurse practitioners placed value on the autonomous work they conducted, and being able to grow their skills to support their vulnerable communities. All participants were motivated to do the work to support their rural patients who would otherwise have no one else to do the job. These findings can be interpreted the same as Kan and Klu (2023), which suggests high levels of autonomy and skill variety are universal across rural contexts. Additionally, participants in Daellenbach et al.'s study (2020) found that passion to support the rural community motivated them to stay. This finding aligns with the sixth work outcome of passion as identified by Astakhova et al. (2024). As these findings were identified in rural NZ communities, they are likely to be relevant to the current study which operates in the same cultural context. Thus, providing this theoretical evidence was valid, we could further expect participants who are happy in their work to speak highly of the autonomy and skill variety they are provided. We could also expect to see passion be a key work outcome derived from these characteristics.

In summary, if Job Characteristics Theory were relevant to the current study, participants who are happy in their role may state having high levels of autonomy and skill variety. Effective feedback may also be identified as supporting participant retention, with discussion regarding significance, meaningfulness, and perceived responsibility of the work completed alongside kiritaki. Most importantly, we would expect participants who are happy in their role to describe their work as aligning with their personal needs and interests. It is important to include a theory on job design as it will establish the factors within a job that will make a rural social worker stay. However, Job Characteristics Theory is limited in that it does not include external factors, such as workload and the wider community, like other theories. It also does not address poor work outcomes like burnout, which is high within the social work industry (see Kim & Stoner, 2008; Thomas, 2013). Thus, one further theory to address this latter factor is important.

Job Demands and Resources Theory

Job Demands and Resources Theory (Job Demands-Resources Theory; Demerouti et al., 2001) is an explicit extension of Job Characteristics Theory, with the five core characteristics classified as job resources (Holtom et al., 2008). The theory implies that job satisfaction and employee motivation and wellbeing, are affected by job demands, job resources, and personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). If job demands outweigh job and personal resources, Job Demands-Resources Theory posits that poor work outcomes, like poor work engagement, are produced. Alternatively, if job and personal resources outweigh job demands, positive work outcomes, like better work engagement, are produced. Resources and demands must also be closely matched to avoid poor work outcomes resulting from boredom and poor work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Positive work outcomes have been linked to retention, while poor work outcomes have been linked to turnover (Roodt, 2018). Therefore, Job Demands-Resources Theory is likely to help in answering the thesis question as it considers workplace-related factors as perceived by the rural social worker. This will lead to a better understanding of what impacts their retention.

The theory has been extensively researched in varying industries (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Figure 1). Interestingly, general job demands were found more strongly related to emotional exhaustion than more specific emotional demands like confrontation with death and dying (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998, pp 84-85). For example, when investigating burnout through Job Demands-Resources Theory, Kim and Wang (2018) found from surveying 1517 service workers in Korea that when social support was low, it heightened emotional labour, which led to participant burnout. Additionally, when job resources of autonomy and social support were present, these helped to combat job demands. This evidence is relevant to the current study as social workers can be viewed as service workers and, therefore, fit within the participant sample. Therefore, the theory and evidence from Kim and Wang (2018) are relevant to the thesis question, and also demonstrate that poor work outcomes, which have been linked to turnover, resulted from job demands outweighing resources. While there is a large participant base, a limitation of Kim and Wang (2018) is that it focuses on general service worker research and does not focus on a sole occupation. However, should their evidence still be valid in current study, we might expect to see participants who are exhibiting poor work outcomes like burnout, to not be inclined to stay in their job. Likewise, we might

expect participants who are happy in their jobs to discuss having the appropriate support and personal resources available, which contribute to their overall retention.

The social work industry is one further industry to which Job Demands-Resources Theory has been applied (Figure 1). For example, Geisler et al. (2019) surveyed 831 Swedish social workers and found that job resources, such as work quality and team and supervisor support, were strongly linked to work engagement, job satisfaction, and positive work outcomes. In the same study, psychological safety climate[2] only had this with job satisfaction. NZ research has partially challenged these findings, as Tan et al. (2021) argued that psychological capacity[3] was most important to combat job demands within 303 nonprofit social workers. Tan and Yeap's (2022) NZ social work findings further complicate this by demonstrating that while meaningful work enhances engagement and retention, it does not mitigate burnout. Both meaningful work (Tan et al., 2023) and burnout (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Thomas, 2013) have been associated with the social work industry, so it would not be surprising if the same occurred in the context of NZ rural social work. The variance in social worker evidence may also be explained by the varying practices and policies between Sweden and NZ, which suggests Tan et al. (2021) and Tan and Yeap's (2022) findings will be more relevant to the thesis question. Thus, should this evidence be valid in the current study, we could expect participants to define their work as meaningful and engage well in the workplace. However, they may also simultaneously feel exhausted or burnt out. These predictions could then have either a negative or neutral impact on the retention of social workers, depending on their individual personal resources as to whether or not demands are outweighed.

As well as international and NZ social worker research, Job Demands-Resources Theory can be imposed over rural social worker research (Figure 1). For example, when surveying 4940[4] healthcare social workers in the United States, Whitaker et al. (2006) found that there were not only higher caseloads for rural social workers, but also increased severity of patient

[2] Psychological safety climate refers to the personal capabilities of the individual to keep themselves safe from stress and harm.

[3] Psychological capacity is similar to psychological safety climate, and refers to a personal resource which helps to manage individual stress and wellbeing.

[4] 49.4% response rate from a sample of 10,000.

health concerns and less available resources compared to their urban counterparts. Using Job Demands-Resources Theory, this evidence can be correlated to job demands, which must be outweighed by resources for participants to exhibit positive work outcomes and want to stay in their roles. Similarly, in NZ rural practitioner research (Figure 1), when investigating retention, Beeler et al. (2022) also found that their 15 podiatrist participants experienced large job demands due to limited resources and high workloads. Their evidence showed this led to participant consideration of voluntary turnover. The same is likely to be found for NZ rural social workers who can be perceived to have similar pressures as other NZ rural practitioners, and demonstrating that this evidence and Job Demands-Resources Theory are further relevant to the thesis question. Should this evidence be valid in the current study, we might expect to see participants to have negative views on workloads in terms of severity and number. We might also expect to see fewer resources and services to work collaboratively with, which all contribute to demands outweighing resources to result in the increased likelihood of employee turnover.

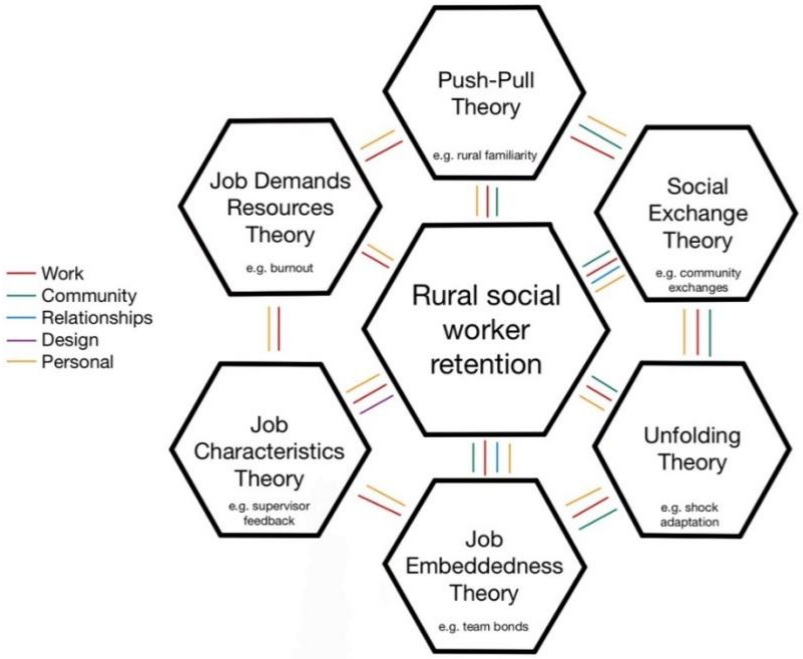
In summary, should Job Demands-Resources Theory be valid in the current context, we could expect resources to outweigh demands for participants exhibiting positive work outcomes. Such resources include job resources of team links and organisational support, and personal resources like demonstration of personal wellbeing measures. Should job demands, like workload, outweigh resources, outweigh resources, we could expect participants to exhibit poor work outcomes like burnout. Job Demands-Resources Theory initially appears similar to Social Exchange Theory. However, job demands differ from costs due to being more task-focused and stable, while costs are more relational and subjective. The inclusion of personal resources is also beneficial as it further supports the inclusion of the individual context and its contribution to job demands and resources. Thus, Job Demands-Resources Theory can provide a framework for rural social work organisations to understand the relationship between job demands, and job and personal resources. However, if used on its own, it would be limited as it does not include the surrounding community, which has previously been determined an important context for NZ rural social worker retention.

Key Differences and Overlap of Theories

It is important to state the key differences of the theories, so their inclusions in this thesis are justified. Push-Pull Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Job Demands-Resources Theory have included both positive and negative factors. Social Exchange Theory assumed a positive transactional exchange between employee and organisation, while Push-Pull Theory only required there to be more pulls than pushes and focused on the driving factors behind the rural social worker's choice. Job Demands-Resources Theory did not include the community at all, rather focusing on workplace demands and resources and relevant personal resources which can allow the rural social worker to better complete their position requirements. Alternatively, Job Embeddedness Theory and Job Characteristics Theory focused only on positive influences. The former examines links, fit, and sacrifice within the organisation and community, while the latter assumes job design can impact motivation and excludes relationships other than those that give the employee feedback. Unfolding Theory is the most different and focuses on the decision-making process behind turnover, incorporating on shocks or decreased satisfaction based on emotional changes over time. However, as will likely happen when utilising multiple related theories within one study, there is predicted to be theoretical overlap. For example, all six theories suggest that effective supervision is essential in employee retention, meaning the same is also likely for NZ rural social worker retention. Yet, while all theories include the workplace and personal contexts, only four include the community, two relationships, and one job design (Figure 6). Such differences make it important to consider the impact of each theory on NZ rural social worker retention both individually and collectively.

Figure 6

The Six Organisational Theories and Their Associated Rural Social Worker Contexts



Methodological Analysis

As to my knowledge no research has been conducted on NZ rural social worker retention, and with there being very limited research on NZ social worker retention in general, I did not believe it fitting to conduct a meta-analysis or systematic review like Brown et al. (2017). The reason behind this being, the review would be largely focused on international data of rural social worker retention. This would impose differing cultural identity (Pollack, 2024; Smith, 2013) and social work practice (Beddoe & Bartley, 2019) to NZ, with the potential to make the findings less directly relevant. As such, the findings would likely not address the thesis question as best as a focus on NZ research could.

Surveys and questionnaires were heavily considered as they would allow access to a larger participant group, thereby making study findings more generalisable. The approach taken here is one of quantitative analysis, which focuses on the numerical relationships within the data to determine identified patterns. Many of the NZ social work literature included in this chapter used such methods to contribute to their respective fields (see Beddoe et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2020; Tan & Yeap, 2022). However, as the current study is assumed to be the first

on NZ rural social worker retention, I believed a more discussion-based approach with participants would be beneficial to ensure a more in-depth understanding of perspectives are gathered. Qualitative analysis fulfilled this role by examining textual data instead of numerical data, where a smaller participant group is gathered to allow for a deeper exploration of participant voices (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This type of analysis would provide a better starting point for future research.

To gather such informative data, observations and case studies such as those used in Kan and Klu (2023) and Warwick et al. (2023) were considered as they would allow access to practical viewpoints within a rural social work organisation. However, they do not appear directly relevant to the thesis question as it would focus on what I as the researcher had identified as important, rather than this identification occurring during direct discussion with participants. The selected method for this thesis would also have needed to be cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, due to the time constraints for a thesis as set by Massey University, which would have limited the utilisation of such methods. Finally, as a new researcher, I did not believe I had the skills to conduct observations within the social work environment due to the high sensitivity of their caseloads.

Semi-structured interviews have been utilised in both NZ practitioner research (see Adams & Carryer, 2019; Beeler et al., 2022; Kearns et al., 2006) and international social worker research (see Burns et al., 2020; Wu & Chen, 2022) where there has been very little prior research on the topic. They allowed for a flexible approach to predetermined questions, which have provided the researchers the opportunity to explore participant answers further. Thus, semi-structured interviews appeared to be the most appropriate methodology to address the thesis question and associated gap in literature.

Summary

This chapter gave an overview of why the retention of rural social workers is important. It then defined the literature gap surrounding NZ rural social worker retention. To address this gap, I asked the question: "how do organisational theories contribute to the retention of social workers in rural communities of NZ's South Island?" Push-Pull Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Unfolding Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, Job Characteristics Theory, and Job

Demands-Resources Theory were selected because of their differences across retention and turnover. A critical review of each theory was then conducted, with their assumptions imposed over previous international research on employee, social worker, rural social worker, and NZ rural practitioner literature. It was identified that team relationships, workloads, available resources, supervision and community connection were integral in building employee retention. The next chapter will discuss how the literature gap in NZ rural social worker retention will be addressed.

Chapter 2

Method

Participants

I chose a similar participant base to Landsman and Rathman (2022), with participant inclusion criteria limited to either rural social work leaders (Group A) or registered social workers (Group B). A total of three Group A and six Group B participants took part in the study. Participants were recruited from rural organisations that have a large social work function, here on referred to as rural social work organisations. To increase the likelihood of participants having worked for their organisation long-term, the organisations had to have operated in their relevant rural community for at least five years. Participants also had to live and work in a rural community in the South Island of NZ with a population of 10,000 or less, and reside more than one hour's drive from another town with 10,001 or more residents, or nga tangata. This added criterion was to ensure that the community could be considered isolated from an urban community.

For recruitment, five leaders were initially contacted via email (Appendix A). One leader and associated social worker were later excluded due to a realised personal connection between myself and the leader. Another leader required me to address a wider team before consent could be obtained. I obtained approval from this team, however, received no further response from the leader. Consent was received from the three remaining leaders, who gave permission for me to contact their social workers. It was important to gather more participants belonging to Group B to best answer the thesis question. However, to ensure fairness and avoid discrimination, if more than three social workers from the same organisation indicated interest in the research, only the first three to apply could partake. No more than three from each organisation were interested, so this exclusion was not utilised. Seven social workers were interested in the study, with one choosing to later withdraw their consent.

All participants were required to read the Information Sheet and complete the Participant Consent Form (Appendix B). Informed consent from all participants was sought voluntarily, with participants made aware that they could opt out up to 21 days post-interview and all of

their data would be destroyed. One third of participants were from their rural community, and all had been in the social work industry, or for their organisation, for five or more years (Table 1). Participant gender, organisation industry, and identifiers have not been disclosed to protect participant confidentiality due to the small number of current NZ rural social workers. This decision was made after these points were raised by Daellenbach et al. (2020) in their NZ rural midwives study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Age bracket	Ethnicity	From their Rural Community	Years in Social Work Sector	Time in Current Workplace (Years)[5]
Group A					
Leaders					
Participant A1	40+	NZE[6]	No	20+	10-19
Participant A2	40+	European	No	20+	Not taken
Participant A3	40+	NZE	Yes	20+	20+
Group B					
Social Workers					
Participant B1	40+	NZE	No	20+	5-9
Participant B2	40+	NZE	Yes	20+	10-19
Participant B3	40+	NZE	Yes	5-9	>1
Participant B4	30-39	NZE	No	5-9	5-9
Participant B5	30-39	European	No	10-19	1-5
Participant B6	25-29	European	No	5-9	5-9

Procedure

Ethics Application and Considerations

Prior to any participant recruitment, following the Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in NZ (Code of Ethics Review Group, 2012), the Code of Ethics for NZ Social Workers

[5] This question was an additional question added during most interviews and not listed on the interview document. Can be assumed to be longer than two years.

[6] New Zealand European.

(SWRB, 2021), and co-supervisor review, an ethics application for the research was created and sent to Massey University. Ethics approval was obtained from Ohu Matatika 3 [OM3 24/15]. The application was considered high risk as participants were required to talk about experiences in their work and personal lives, which had the possibility of bringing forth unwanted emotion. The study was also considered high risk due to my current employment with a NZ rural social services organisation.

Following ethics approval, I identified social work organisations in collaboration with local community groups. Current and former colleagues, as well as individuals with personal ties to myself, were excluded from the study. As I work collaboratively with professional agencies (Oranga Tamariki, 2021), professional connections were excluded where possible, except in cases where no other social workers within the same organisation consented to participate. This inclusion applied to participants B1 and B6. These inequities will be discussed further under the subsection of Reflexivity.

Additionally, there are many inequities between Māori and non-Māori (Crampton & Baxter, 2018; Smith, 2013) which can diminish the voices of those who identify as Māori. These inequities are more obvious in rural areas where there are diverse fewer healthcare facilities (Whitaker et al., 2006) and higher socioeconomic disparities (Diogo, 2024). Thus, such inequities result in a more vulnerable Māori population. To address this, I sought to develop knowledge that could positively impact the wellbeing, hauora, of Māori people living in such communities, receiving support from Dr Pita King at Massey University. A shift in focus from one community to the entire South Island was then incorporated to better protect rural participant confidentiality. Guidance was also provided on how to give voice to participants whilst adhering to Te Ara Tika, or Māori ethical principles of whakapapa, tika, manaakitanga, and mana (Hudson et al., 2010). I further consulted with a kaiwhakahaere, director, of a rural community group, during the recruitment and interview processes, and adhered to the simplified Te Tiriti Principles of partnership, participation, and protection. These principles are labelled as simplified due to Te Tiriti being a very rich document which cannot be restricted to three principles alone (A. Stevens, personal communication, September 12, 2023).

Data Collection

Following from Chapter 1, interviews were the chosen method for this study. These allowed for an in-depth exploration of participant experiences and perspectives to best address the literature gap. It was initially thought interview questions needed to be as detailed as possible to ensure the thesis question was addressed. However, questions were later cut down to ensure interviews struggled to go over 60 minutes, in which participant concentration was best maintained (Raworth et al., 2012). Interviews were also conducted during participant work hours, with permission, making it further important to reduce the time required from participants. Participants instead could choose to volunteer their time past the 60 minutes allocated. To ensure participant wellbeing, assistance was also offered to set up free trials for the mindfulness applications, Calm and Headspace, post interview.

Interview questions focused on both workplace and community contexts, which were previously identified as important in rural worker retention (see Cosgrave et al., 2019; George et al., 2023; Schenck, 2004). My co-supervisors, Dr. Veronica Hopner and Professor Stuart Carr, reviewed the initial draft of the interview questions, which led to modifications to minimise participant prompting. Modifications included shortening questions and replacing terms like "burnout" with "energy levels" (Appendix C). An external social worker also read over my interview questions to ensure a social work focus underlined my research. Ultimately, each open-ended question related to either participant personality or one of the six theories from the literature review:

1. What is your age bracket? 20-25, 25-29. 30-39, 40+
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. Are you from this area?
4. How many years have you spent in the social work sector?

Extra question: How many years have you been employed with your organisation?

5. Can you describe yourself to me? Your personality, interests, etc. What do you like about your role that relates back to your personal description?
6. Briefly discuss the generic social work description below. Can you elaborate on what this entails in your current role?

"Social workers provide care, advice and support to people with personal or social problems and help with community and social issues." Careers NZ.

7. Do you feel satisfied in your role? Can you elaborate?
8. Can you describe your work environment to me, including values and how these are practiced?
9. What does supervision look like to you in your workplace? Broadly, what do you speak about in your sessions?
10. What have your energy levels been like in this role? Can you elaborate?
11. In the workforce, a push factor is what makes you consider leaving your role, whereas a pull factor is something pulling you to stay. Can you elaborate on what these are for you in your role, and if one type may outweigh the other?
12. Has there ever been a time or times in your current role when you considered leaving, and why?
13. *Group A:* How much support do you feel you get from your board and wider organisation?
    Group B: How much support do you feel you get from management?
14. What brought you to your rural community?
15. What does a normal week look like for you outside of work? What are your routines, hobbies, etc.? Does your work sometimes mean you have to change these?
16. Overall, do you feel happy within your local community? Does it make you want to stay with your organisation? Why/why not?

Interviews were conducted in a confidential space, with the option to meet via Zoom or in person. Supportive and respectful interview strategies were utilised to empower equal partnership, and build trust and comfort for participants. Trust was particularly important in the current study, as participants were asked personal and work-related questions from myself, an employee within the rural social services industry. Participants chose the time and place of their interview, with laughter and interview breaks incorporated as needed. Both in-person and online interviews were recorded via Zoom and took between 30 and 50 minutes to complete. The recording produced text transcription and audio only; video recording was not enabled to protect participant confidentiality. Audio recordings were left on Zoom which were self-deleted 90 days post interview. The edited and de-identified transcriptions, along with the scanned participant forms, were then securely stored on my personal home desktop

in a password-protected folder, before being moved to my user profile through Massey University's remote computer access system. Participant names were recorded only on the Consent Form, with the forms themselves saved under participant identifiers (e.g., Group A, Participant 1). This approach ensured participant privacy while also allowing other researchers to replicate the analysis. After finishing their interview, participants were asked to complete the Authority for Release of Transcripts form (Appendix B), which stated they had been given the opportunity to read and edit their interview transcript.

Data Analysis

Qualitative, narrative analysis was initially selected as it captures *how* participants discuss their lives, priorities and challenges (Silver & Willig, 2022). It also considers the cultural and social context, determined important in Chapter 1 (Beddoe & Bartley, 2019; Pollack, 2024). However, the more I familiarised myself with the data, I realised reflexive thematic analysis was the better fit. This methodology enables the researcher to identify and report patterns within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2023). It is an appropriate method of choice for an under researched topic such as NZ rural social worker retention, due to its flexibility and simplicity compared to other research methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I based my research in a realist/essentialist epistemological stance, where I mostly considered the semantic nature of the data set, or its description. A hybrid inductive-deductive approach was chosen, where I first looked for themes in the data, then compared these themes against Push-Pull Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Unfolding Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, Job Characteristics Theory, and Job Demands-Resources Theory. I followed the six phases most recently described by Braun & Clarke (2023):

1. Phase 1: Data familiarisation. I immersed myself in the data set by listening to each audio recording twice over, for verbatim transcription. I then moved the transcriptions from TextEdit to Microsoft Word for further familiarisation, utilising the 'comments' function for any repetitive patterns I identified.
2. Phase 2: Data coding. I created codes based on identified patterns, using a separate document to list codes with their relevant data extracts and participant identification. The latter was important as it allowed me to see the frequency of the code across the data set.

3. Phase 3: Generating initial themes. I placed my codes and their participant identifications into subthemes on another separate document. Smaller, or less frequent codes were combined with others based on their similarities, while some were large enough to form a subtheme on their own. Created subthemes were then also grouped together based on similarities to form three candidate subthemes. Codes and subthemes not relevant to my thesis question were removed from this document.
4. Phase 4: Reviewing and developing themes. I was fortunate that my three candidate themes were quite distinct, resulting in less movement between themes. My understanding of NZ rural social worker retention had grown immensely by this stage, with some subthemes and codes were moved between themes as a result, to better fit within the boundaries of each theme.
5. Phase 5: Refining, defining, and naming themes. I started to select data extracts based on how well they represented their theme, subtheme, and code. Here, I thought about what I found interesting within the extract, how it related to prior research, and what it could tell me about theoretical contributions to NZ rural social worker retention. Themes were then defined and named in consultation with Dr. Veronica Hopner. Names of themes, subthemes, and codes were changed in collaboration to better suit the data extracts.
6. Phase 6: Producing the report. My presentation of my findings was produced throughout all phases to ensure my analysis was correct and thorough. During this phase, I regularly checked my 'comments' and written notes, adding and editing as required. This ongoing analysis resulted in interview transcripts being read or listened to between six and eight times each.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, reflexivity applies to the critical examination of how knowledge is created and construed (Court, 2018). Reflexivity is particularly important in reflexive thematic analysis, where the values, personal interpretation, and cultural context of the researcher can create analytic bias if not properly mitigated (Braun & Clarke, 2022). At the time of writing this thesis, I am a 26-year-old female who has worked in social services for the last six years. My employment ranges from support work and government, to health services and whānau work. I moved to Māwhera (Greymouth) two and a half years ago for a promotion, with plans to move to Ōtautahi (Christchurch) for further career progression

before I realised the subjective benefits from remaining in place. I have been around social work and rural communities for some time now, yet I am not a rural social worker. My positionality for the current study is, therefore, an insider-outsider researcher, where I have lived experience of rural life and whānau work but do not belong to the same occupational group as the recruited participants. My positionality most definitely influenced my research, however, by engaging in reflexivity I was able to mitigate related issues as best I could and thus ensure my research remained credible and valid.

To proritise study credibility, validity and reflexivity, I first needed to ensure I was in the right headspace to conduct my research. Without doing so, I risked my positionality and values having a large influence on my literature review, interviews, and analysis. By incorporating breathwork into my pre-study routine, I became calm, relaxed, and focused for the study ahead. A further step in this process included taking off a hypothetical "rural whānau worker" hat, placing it to the side, and replacing it with a hypothetical "researcher" hat. This enabled me to essentially separate my position as a rural nga tangata and whānau worker from my position as a researcher, to gather information solely for the purpose of my research. I am a visual learner and so found this method particularly powerful. This entire process was particularly important when I was coming home tired or distressed from a day at work. To further ensure I exhibited control over potential biases, I asked my workplace to support me in working condensed weeks. This meant I worked four days, and had three full days a week to dedicate solely to my research, where I was not coming home from work tired and thus more influenced by bias.

I then had to consider the dynamics at play within each interview. My selected exclusion of participants with personal and professional connections to myself enabled me to better analyse participant stories in a way that was morally ethical, respectful, and caring (Goodson, 2017). I hoped my disclosure of this step when gathering participant consent would enable participants to feel more comfortable in sharing their personal perspectives and experiences during their interviews. Rural nga tangata can also be hard to connect with unless the researcher has a good understanding of the area being studied (Pitt, 1998). While participants may have felt more comfortable engaging in the research due to research "credibility" gained from my lived experience (Mehrabadi et al., 2024, p. 3), there was a risk that participants would answer in a way that they believed I expected them to, thus negatively impacting

participant responses and research credibility. To mitigate this issue, I made sure to reiterate in discussions prior to starting each audio recording that my research was intended to be a safe space to share, or not to share, perspectives and experiences. I also routinely confirmed that confidentiality would be maintained at all times.

The final step relied on the credibility of my analysis. As themes, subthemes and codes were identified by myself as the sole researcher, they were based on my personal interpretation and cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, I chose to regularly ask myself where I had found each code and subtheme; had I identified it in the data set, or assumed it would be a code and brazenly looked for supporting extracts? This step was essential to ensure I remained reflective and reflexive, and my research findings remained credible (Court & Abbas, 2022). Finally, I continuously read and re-read participant transcripts, to ensure their voices had been accurately reported. However, my insider knowledge of and passion for the industry did mean that I struggled to narrow down the data to form the three themes. Regular note-taking throughout my analysis assisted greatly with this process, as well as discussion with my co-supervisors to consider alternative explanations for my literature review and findings.

Summary

This chapter discussed how I chose to address NZ rural social worker retention and the associated gap in literature. To better answer my thesis question, participants included only rural social work leaders and registered social workers they supported. Those with personal connections to myself were excluded, and participants with a professional connection included only when necessary. Consultation with Dr. Pita King, a kaiwhakahaere and my co-supervisors throughout my ethics and research procedure ensured I followed best practice while upholding Te Ara Tika and Te Tiriti O Waitangi. I aimed to better this process by utilising reflexivity throughout my thematic analysis, to limit the impact of my own values on my reported findings. The next chapter will discuss these findings in detail.

Chapter 3

Results and Analysis

Theme Overview

This chapter discusses the findings from the interviews as collated into three themes. The first theme is Community Embeddedness, which comprises of three subthemes. The first subtheme, ‘relationships within the community’, centres on community ties and professional boundaries. The second subtheme, ‘location, geography, and setting’, focuses on the local environment and rural vulnerability. The last subtheme, ‘security’, consists of discussions about participant accommodation, pet ownership, and maintaining intimate relationships.

The second theme is Work Conditions, which comprises of four subthemes. The first subtheme, ‘relationships in the workplace’, centres on both internal and external relationships for participants. The second subtheme, ‘implications of the industry requiring professional registration’, discusses the need for rural social workers in terms of recruitment and adaptability. The third subtheme, ‘rural workplace structures’, focuses on organisational politics and hierarchy. The last subtheme, ‘work commute’, concerns the commute to, from, and during work.

The third theme is Challenges and Opportunities, which is about participants’ individual perspectives and comprises of four subthemes. The first subtheme, ‘introvert tendencies’, centres on recovery needed from client, or kiritaki, interaction. The second subtheme, ‘rethinking opinions on rural balance and workload’, consists of discussions on work-life balance and workload. The third subtheme, ‘occupational commitment’, focuses on participant commitment to their role and industry. Finally, the fourth subtheme, ‘role versatility’, discusses job design and core characteristics.

Theme One: Community Embeddedness

Aligning with previous research (Cosgrave et al., 2019; Kearns et al., 2006; Landsman & Rathman, 2022; Schenck, 2004), community was determined important among participants. All had positive things to say about their rural environment, with comparisons regularly made to urban living. There was also no discussion of moving away, outside of one participant who was considering travel, but viewed their community as their home base. This theme can be described in terms of relationships, or off-the-job links, and the physical setting, or off-the-job fit. It can also be described in terms of the security derived from their place in the community, which would be sacrificed should participants move. As such, this theme is titled Community Embeddedness, where participants are observed as embedded in their community through links, fit, and sacrifice.

Relationships Within the Community

Community relationships are considered equally as important as workplace relationships when addressing employee retention (Sinclair et al., 2015). In rural communities specifically, it is common for such relationships to be built and maintained more frequently due to the high social visibility of rural residents, or nga tangata (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). For example, rural nga tangata often run into each other more frequently than their urban counterparts because they live in close-knit communities with limited shared resources, like supermarkets, where social interaction is facilitated (Lai, 2016). These community interactions play an important part in building a sense of belonging for rural nga tangata who are otherwise socially isolated (Mandal & Phillips, 2022). However, they pose a dilemma for rural social workers, as there are more now opportunities for work and personal life to overlap than if the social worker were working in an urban community (Humble et al., 2013). It is, therefore, important for the social worker to balance both work and community interaction so they can maintain their retention in their organisation. These complexities in community relationships as a rural social worker will be defined in terms of community ties and professional boundaries.

Community Ties. For the purpose of this thesis, community ties refer to relationships which connect an individual to their community. A person can have many community ties, which assist in them staying in place for longer (Diogo, 2024). Participants commonly

discussed community ties in terms of local whānau connections, with many labelling this connection a deciding factor in moving to and staying in their rural community:

> *Um, also... we're having children, we wanted to move to a place that was.. close to family, but also... had a laid-back type community lifestyle that both me and my wife quite like. We didn't like city sort of living. Um, we'd live out in the bush quite happily. So we, um... could have gone to- there's a few places we could have gone. We came here because my wife's parents happened to be here. Umm... yes, so that bought me here.* (Leader).

> *So I've spent a bit of time over here - I don't know, years - and my partner is from here, and we just decided like what's important in life. And let's step back a little bit.* (Leader).

Human beings are wired to be with those who share the same genealogy (P. Payne, personal communication, March 24, 2025). This is referenced to by the above participants, who chose to move closer to their whānau to raise their children, their tamariki, and be around what matters to them most. Having family live locally enables us to connect with our whānau within an otherwise individualised, modern society. Local whānau connections are therefore crucial to our interdependence. For Māori in particular, connection to family and the land is further important, as it enables them to build and maintain their cultural identity (Rameka, 2018). Rural nga tangata will also benefit from whānau connection, as it can help to address their additional obstacles of geographical and social isolation. Thus, these findings align with prior research stating that whānau connection is important in rural worker (Kearns et al., 2006; Landsman & Rathman, 2022) and nga tangata (Diogo, 2024) retention. Push-Pull Theory can contribute here, which assumes that net pulls must outweigh net pushes for an individual to stay in place (Lee, 1966; McAuley et al., 2006). Because whānau connection is highly valued among participants, it can be viewed as a pull to stay in their rural community. These pulls may further strengthen with the number of relationships found within the community or workplace. Therefore, a rural social worker with local whānau connection will be more likely to stay in their rural community.

This local whānau connection provides rural social workers the opportunity for regular social interaction. With daily, quality interaction frequently linked to wellbeing (Hudson et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020), this social support can be an important factor in keeping social workers in their rural community. In the same sense, social support can also be obtained through interaction with friends and neighbours. Research further demonstrates that community ties in the form of friendship can be viewed in terms of attachment and links to, and sacrifice from, a community, which decrease overall turnover intent (Gonzalez et al., 2018). With participants commonly discussing their local friendships, these findings suggest that Job Embeddedness Theory contributes to the current study, with friendships related to off-the-job links. Should the rural social worker move away from their community, they would be sacrificing these links and their associated interaction. They may also temporarily sacrifice their wellbeing as was determined by Hudson et al. (2020) and Sun et al., (2020). Such off-the-job links therefore become important factors in their community embeddedness and retention. Further participant discussion was also had around interaction with neighbours:

> *… catching up with friends… go for a walk, or.. yeah. Might only get as far as the gate, and then the neighbour's there, and you get to chatting.* (Leader).

This leader appears to value their interaction with their neighbours. As such, community ties in the form of neighbours can be associated with further off-the-job links for the participant. These community ties, along with whānau connection and friendships, can not only improve community embeddedness through off-the-job links and sacrifice, but also strengthen with the length of time spent in a community (Keene et al., 2013; Munn & Munn, 2003). For example, for the above leader, they are able to regularly chat with their neighbours because they grew their relationship over time. Two participants directly compared their available time to urban life:

> *Um… I think there's… more of a connection because.. you've got the time to be involved in your community more, um, being here. I feel like in the city, you know you spend so much time in your car or, um, it costs so much to do different things. You*

kind of live in your own bubble, but I think here it is, and it always has been, about connection. So yeah, I feel pretty lucky. (Social Worker).

*And just like the travel, you know, travel to work, traveling around, so that's an additional- though I'm pretty- I don't *really* get stressed very easily, but just that additional, you know, if you're stuck in traffic on the way home, and that's just yeah. That's gonna.. yeah. Put a bit of a downer on your evening and stress you out, and.. yeah, so I guess those kind of things from living here.* (Social Worker).

These responses demonstrate that the participants perceive rural nga tangata to have more time to foster community connection and wellbeing due the lower amount of traffic that comes with having a smaller population. They may also explain why one third of participants were found to be members of community groups. Such groups allow for stronger community ties by building a sense of belonging (Lambert et al., 2013). This suggests that participation in community meetings provides further regular interaction while building off-the-job links. Social workers who value such connection could also deem themselves as more likely to fit within a rural community, referencing to off-the-job fit as assumed by Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001). Additionally, this connection is something that they would be sacrificing by moving away. Thus, participation in community meetings can increase rural off-the-job embeddedness. In the current study, community meetings were not just groups participants attended, but also meetings or programmes they facilitated:

*I might have community meetings? I'm involved in a community project here. Um... I'm involved in *rotaries*, so there could be rotary meetings …* (Leader).

I instruct a recreational program, during the summer? So that is a Monday, and a Thursday, evening. (Social Worker).

By leading, and being a part of, community groups, participants are provided with autonomy and the ability to make an impact on the environment in which they reside. As participants spoke positively of their membership, these outcomes can be viewed as rewards resulting from life in a rural community. By staying in the rural community, participants are

maximising these rewards, with the community also receiving access to a local, registered professional which is otherwise hard to attain (Hoeft et al., 2018). As such, there is evidence of a positive transactional exchange, which confirms the contribution of Social Exchange Theory to NZ rural social worker retention. In a similar sense, connection resulting from the community ties of whānau, friends, neighbours, and community groups can also be reviewed as rewards which will be maximised when the social worker stays in place. These findings align with previous rural research which values community connection and familiarity (Daellenbach et al., 2020; Landsman & Rathman, 2022).

Professional Boundaries. Whilst community ties were viewed positively, becoming embedded in the community was also a process of navigating professional relationships for many of the participants as they managed living and working in a rural place. Much like psychologists with their Code of Ethics for NZ psychologists (2012), social workers must comply with the NZ Social Worker Code of Conduct (2021). This compliance ensures that social workers place appropriate boundaries between professional and personal relationships with kiritaki, to avoid inappropriate relationships from occurring. However, it does not hold the same for rural nga tangata who generally interact with each other more frequently than their urban counterparts. Four participants discussed navigating professional and personal connections, with two relating these to being raised in their rural community:

> *Sometimes I feel like I've got a slightly different place in the community because I wasn't born here, so I don't have like the really old.. connections, and like lots of connections. I feel like I kind of like skim along the surface in some ways? But I'm really happy about that as well, being a social worker, and knowing a lot about some of the families. And.. yeah, not feeling too conflicted, or, too many kind of.. tricky things. I would- I think it's a different way of navigating it for the social workers that were born here, and kind of knowing lots of those.. contacts.* (Social Worker).

> *I think I'm very... lucky, in some way, that I didn't grow up here? I think it can be difficult if you've grown up here, and you know everyone, like I think I would feel quite overwhelmed... because I'm just not used to it, I guess? Like at home, you know your people, but you can walk through the city, and you will not meet anyone that you know. So I think, um.. yeah. So... I think I'm lucky with that. I can see, though, from a*

> *colleague who has grown up here, how beautiful it can be also for, for your practice but private life, to know a lot of people.* (Social Worker).

These participants acknowledge that community ties can be beneficial. However, they also perceive that such ties, in the form of knowing kiritaki prior to being employed, can hinder professional practice. This finding supports that of Daellenbach et al. (2020), who argues that personal connections can make a professional role challenging. It also confirms the effect that heightened social visibility, as stated by Pugh and Cheers (2010), has on NZ rural social workers. In this scenario, Job Embeddedness Theory has limitations. Having prior ties to a rural community, like whānau connection, friends, neighbours, and community group membership as found above, are meant to increase community, i.e. off-the-job, embeddedness. However, it appears that for these two participants, off-the-job links with kiritaki prior to practicing as a social worker would add further job demands, and which could negatively impact on-the-job embeddedness. While this consideration may be subjective, it demonstrates that Job Embeddedness Theory cannot solely be utilised to understand NZ rural social worker retention.

The perceived job demands associated with prior kiritaki relationships, suggests that Job Demands-Resources Theory can be utilised alongside Job Embeddedness Theory. Job Demands-Resources Theory assumes that resources must just outweigh job demands for employee retention to be maintained (Roodt, 2018). As the participants viewed such relationships as impacting negatively on their practice should they have experienced them, these relationships can be associated with job demands. They also confirm the argument of Bosh and Boisen (2011) that dual relationships are unavoidable for rural social workers. Because these two participants are not from their rural community, they do not have to navigate prior relationships with community members who had later become kiritaki. Thus, the finding also suggests that a job resource can arise from the rural social worker simply not having lived in their rural community prior to starting work.

However, community relationships, or interaction, with kiritaki are not only limited to being experienced by social workers from the rural community. As a safeguarding measure, one

participant discussed strategies like not naming kiritaki within their peer supervision sessions[7]. By completing this step, the participant argued their team found it easier to navigate information sharing, with benefits to both locally raised staff, and staff not from the rural community but still potentially interacting with kiritaki outside of work hours. This strategy can be viewed as a professional boundary, which upholds confidentiality as is necessary in the NZ social worker code of conduct (SWRB, 2021). The importance of maintaining appropriate professional boundaries as a rural social worker (Pugh, 2007) was also discussed by a participant after being approached in public:

> *You have to know your boundaries really, really well? And so people know that there's no point in asking social worker me in the supermarket something because social worker me's not going to answer it. ...* (Social Worker).

This takes time, as they continued:

> *... It took a few years.* (Social Worker).

For this participant, time and experience became the necessary tools to strengthen their professional boundaries. Adaptability, a personal resource, also helped to balance the associated job demand of kiritaki interaction outside of work hours for them. This extract shows dissimilarity to prior research where a participant chose to leave their role over the same interaction (Wu & Chen, 2022). Rather, it aligns with the prediction in Chapter 1, with it likely their adaptability enabled the participant to recover from and counteract the demand, or shock, of such kiritaki interaction. This surrounding context thus confirms an assumption, and thus the contribution, of Unfolding Theory, where the participant chose to adapt and retain their position in their organisation, rather than voluntarily leave.

[7] Social worker supervision in a team (group) environment.

Location, Geography and Setting

As well as the upholding of professional boundaries, rural social worker retention has also been linked to being rurally raised and enjoying the positives of rural living (Mackie, 2011). Additionally, Landsman and Rathman (2022) argue that relationships in and familiarity with a rural community can make a social worker the certain type of person to enjoy residing there. Study findings extended this argument, with participants instead linking being a certain type of person to their local environment:

> *And I think the local community and what it has got to offer… if it's what you need, then you are really kind of.. your- your cup is full. Yeah. So it's a yes, yes. And I just love the fact that's a little town.* (Social Worker).

> *... and this community is a certain type of lifestyle. Not everybody likes it, or would prefer to live... elsewhere. For me it's... I like it.* (Leader).

An individual who is satisfied within their community is more likely to reside there long-term (Sinclair et al., 2015). As the above participants point out, there are many differences between urban and rural location, geography, and settings. For example, urban nga tangata undergo more social and commercial development (Jacobs & Appleyard, 2015) and therefore have easier access to local activities, while rural nga tangata have easier access to natural life (Mell & Whitten, 2021). These rural-urban differences can be categorised into subjective pushes and pulls. For example, for one person, a push from long-term residence in a rural community could be the limited access to local commercial activities such as shopping malls. They would then view the access to such shopping malls as a pull for long-term residence in an urban community. Alternatively, these two participants view the lifestyle and smaller rural community as pulls. It does not necessarily suggest they do not enjoy urban life, however, the positive discussion around the community demonstrates that their net pulls to their rural community outweigh their net pushes. These findings support those of Kearns et al. (2006) who deemed the natural environment and relaxed lifestyle as pulls to stay for NZ rural doctors. In this instance, the contribution of Push-Pull Theory is confirmed, with participants observed to have an increased chance of long-term retention based on the pull provided by enjoyment of the local community.

This enjoyment can also be associated with attachment to the surrounding environment. The creators of Job Embeddedness Theory state that local amenities and culture can increase attachment (Mitchell et al., 2001), which suggests that to enjoy the environment and grow attachment, individuals have to be compatible with these factors. This helps them to build off-the-job fit, leading to higher off-the-job embeddedness and, supposedly, long-term retention. It has already been argued in this subtheme that rural communities have easier access to nature. Thus, to build off-the-job fit in a rural community, there is an assumption that individuals must also enjoy their external environment. In support of this assumption, participants often spoke positively about doing outside activities, such as bike rides, tramps, and to the river. Going outside was also directly related to social worker self-care:

> *I think a lot of... for me personally, um... the outdoors keeps me grounded. So they talk about a lot of self-care when you go into the helping sector, especially social work. So for me, I've got easy access to the outdoors, so... um, can do that pretty well.* (Social Worker).

Spending time outside has a positive relationship with mental health (Richardson et al., 2021), making it an effective strategy for social workers who work an emotionally demanding job. This social worker demonstrates their attachment to the outdoors and how it helps with their wellbeing, their hauora, which was reflected within the data set. Thus, participants valuing their access to, and activities in, the outdoors suggests that they would sacrifice these should they move to an urban community. Following the assumptions of Job Embeddedness Theory, this off-the-job sacrifice related to easier access to nature, mental health and self-care strategies will increase off-the-job embeddedness for all participants. This community embeddedness can be viewed as a protective factor for worker retention as it helps to ensure the rural social worker stays in place.

Such embeddedness has now been described as a positive. However, there are also challenges that come with rural living for participants. Firstly, working as a social worker in NZ requires an understanding of the impact of the surrounding environment on kiritaki, such as financial access to food and health services (Maidment, 2022). In addition, NZ rural practitioners must also be aware of the impacts of geographical isolation, lack of services, and limited supermarket availability on themselves and kiritaki (Daellenbach et al., 2020; Mitchell et al.,

2021; Pitt, 1998). This rural vulnerability poses the issue of increased job demands for rural social workers, as they work with kiritaki who require services that they may struggle to access. Following Job Demands-Resources Theory, should these demands not be outweighed by resources, there is a higher likelihood for voluntary turnover and related loss of employee retention. While rural vulnerability was not discussed in relation to turnover, it can be confirmed as a job demand, with participants regularly mentioning the rural "gap":

> *I mean, in rural.. areas, where we lose *any* of our organisations, we don't always have.. *other* organisations to refer on to? And urban, there's *often* another organisation *somewhere* that will pick up.. a referral, or a gap in service. But we- we don't *have* that. And if we lose any *more*, then it just gets less and less, and it seems like we're.. being drawn in, instead of the growth and development happening, and everybody's *expanding* and offering *different* services.. seems like we're getting sucked in.* (Leader).

> *And it's very hard to... it takes a long time to get it in a small place, because it's so different to a bigger area. Every area has their own.. issues? Ours... is mainly a geographical nature of where we are. And the isolation, especially, socioeconomics, I mean, we're a really poor area. You know, housing is very substandard. All kinds of things like that. I mean, I've- I've even written to councils, got houses, you know... being unsanitary. Because yeah, just everything like that.* (Social Worker).

These findings align with previous rural social worker (Whitaker et al., 2006) and NZ rural practitioner (Beeler et al., 2022) research where it was noted that workers had extra demands due to having limited resources and services. Additionally, the client base of social workers means that they likely have kiritaki with disabilities who require more than rural public services can provide (Dew et al., 2012). These two data extracts confirm that there is a high level of related task significance within rural social work that results from the lack of services and the physical isolation. With task significance being a core characteristic of Job Characteristics Theory, it can be assumed that rural vulnerability may also lead to reduced turnover intent if experienced in high levels, which it is observed to be for participants within the South Island. However, this is only if the rural social worker values task significance, as Job Characteristics Theory also assumes that the five characteristics must be tailored to the

needs of the individual (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Rural vulnerability is therefore an important consideration for rural social workers which has the ability to impact their retention, depending their subjective views.

Rural vulnerability can also be linked to housing, as suggested by the above participant. Housing in rural areas is linked to lower availability, poor housing conditions, and poor sustainability due to the distance from tertiary hospitals (Antin et al., 2024). Because rural communities often have lower incomes than their urban counterparts (Bollman & Reimer, 2009), this may make it harder for rural property owners to remedy substantial housing issues (Ehrenberg et al., 2013). This is especially true for kiritaki, who are working with a social worker due to, but not limited to financial or health vulnerability. In the same vein, rural social workers who are home owners are also likely to give more energy to finding tradespeople, of which they have to outsource from further away urban communities due to limited local availability. Therefore, not only can housing and repairs be viewed as job demands and a push away from living rurally, the associated energy cost is also maximised and can result in a negative transactional social worker-community exchange. Thus, Social Exchange Theory can contribute when understanding retention.

Security

Rural vulnerability within NZ can be better understood through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) states that shelter is a basic psychological necessity before the levels of safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualisation can be met (Figure 7). This theory was directly referenced to by one participant when discussing kiritaki needs. As stated in the previous subtheme, NZ rural communities are often associated with low resident socioeconomic status, which can produce physical, emotional and financial barriers to attaining the needs. On the other hand, the benefits of living in rural settings may include things harder to achieve in urban environments that contribute to the higher levels and more psychological states of Maslow's Hierarchy. This subtheme will discuss security in terms of 'accommodation', 'pet ownership', and 'maintaining intimate relationships' for NZ rural social workers.

Figure 7

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

Note. The content of this figure is subject to copyright.

Accommodation. Many participants discussed home ownership, which likely was an important factor in them continuing to work in their rural community. The average value for a rural NZ home sits at $507,308 compared to $933,612 for the nation (Infometrics, 2024). This validates the finding of Diogo (2024) who states that housing in rural communities is more affordable. Because of this difference, it may be easier for rural nga tangata to purchase property and avoid the insecurity of tenancies, i.e. temporary housing. Owning a home in NZ also secures a fixed or floating mortgage and provides security against raising rent prices (McIlraith, 2024). Here the contributions of Push-Pull Theory can be assumed, with participants likely pulled to stay living in their rural community because they owned local, permanent housing. Cheaper homes may also serve as a pull to stay living and working in a rural community for those who hope to own a home in future. One participant can be observed to compare these rural-urban differences:

> *And I often think, we could not afford like… to live in other places in the lifestyle that we have doing the jobs that we do. Yeah.* (Social Worker).

This participant can be seen to discuss the off-the-job sacrifice of their living arrangement, should they and their spouse move from their rural community to elsewhere. The extract thus demonstrates the contribution of Job Embeddedness Theory, where the participant is more embedded in their community because of the sacrifice that would need to be made should they move. As such, their home ownership can be viewed as a contributing factor to their retention. Similarly, a positive transactional exchange between participant and community is observed based on home ownership alone. The participant is rewarded with maximised feelings of security by staying in the exchange, while the community again retains access to a local, registered practitioner. Here Social Exchange Theory can be utilised to understand retention in terms of home ownership. However, if a rural social worker does not have the financial resources to buy, the lack of rentals in rural areas are slim (Ehrenberg et al., 2013). This statement was supported by one participant:

> *We bought a house down here.. without even, sight unseen, we just bought it, ha ha. Because we were trying to rent, and it was even hard- because we thought, we'll do it for a year, see if you like it, rent somewhere... but that seemed hard to even get rentals, and it... actually was easier for us to- to buy?* (Social Worker).

Following Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 7), an individual can only focus on employment once they have accommodation. Thus, rural social workers who are in rentals have an increased possibility of needing to move either within the community or away from the community to find another property. This insecurity poses a large threat to retention for rural social workers who are not in the position to buy a home. Whether by choice or force, their temporary housing arrangement may push them towards an urban community, which is likely to have more rental opportunities. Thus, Push-Pull Theory can further contribute to this subtheme, where ongoing, limited rental accommodation can be labelled a push away from the community, and thus have a negative impact on NZ rural social worker retention.

Pet Ownership. In NZ, the town house development occurring in urban areas has not yet rural communities. This can contribute to rural properties having larger land areas, which makes keeping pets such as horses and chickens more feasible. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs assumes that, once the need for accommodation has been met, love and belonging can be built. This love and belonging can come from friendship and connection, which pets can provide to increase overall security. Pets further build security by being associated with coping mechanisms of workplace stressors (Maran et al., 2022), and autonomy and social satisfaction (Luhmann & Kalitzki, 2018). Additionally, they have been found to play a role in mitigating stress of social work kiritaki (Pitt, 2025) and students (Vancil, 2020). In NZ, having pets is more common in rural communities (Forrest et al., 2023), with 77% of pet owners living in rural areas (Companion Animals NZ [CANZ], 2020). Rural NZ communities also have the highest rate of horse ownership at 7%, the second highest rate of bird ownership at 8%, and a total of 44% of rural nga tangata own at least one dog (CANZ, 2020). Coincidentally, two thirds of participants in this study mentioned pets ranging from dogs to chickens and horses:

> *Otherwise.. I've got a horse, I love riding… yeah, which is obviously amazing here. It's nice to be so rural for that purpose. And I've got a garden and chooks and.. other animals.* (Social Worker).

> *Last year, a friend of mine gave me five… ten day old chicks.. that I had raised, and now I've got chickens and they are so cool! All have different personalities.* (Leader).

With the high frequency of participant pet ownership, and the higher rates of ownership in NZ rural communities, these participants may be pulled to stay in their rural community because they view it as an appropriate and common place to keep pets. In turn, and following the assumption of Push-Pull Theory, this pull can contribute to their long-term rural residency and thus positively impact their retention. However, participants who valued the love and security from their pets would also need to factor in the permanency of their pet ownership should they choose to leave their rural community for an urban location. This move requires new accommodation, placing limitations on the tenancies that rural social workers with pets can apply for. Here Job Embeddedness Theory can be utilised, where the participant would

have to consider either sacrificing their pet ownership and its partnered love and friendship, or sacrificing rental options, with both choices resulting in a loss of security.

Maintaining Intimate Relationships. When building security, it is again important to note that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs assumes the third level of love and belonging can be met only after physiological needs like housing and employment. Love and belonging has previously been said to come from friendship and connection, which includes connection with a spouse. In relation, four participants discussed either securing work in their rural community to follow their spouse or bringing their spouse with them. However, where Kearns et al. (2006) found limited career opportunities to serve as a push, the same views were not identified in the current study. One participant even directly labelled job opportunities for them and their spouse as a pull:

> *...so there was two jobs that were.. advertised at the same time. So one within his profession. And there was a social work role here. So that's really what pulled us to… yeah.* (Social Worker).

Much like a rural social worker, it is important that spouses are satisfied with their job and community. If this satisfaction is not present, the spouse may leave their community for more suitable work opportunities. As such, can leave a rural social worker choosing between either maintaining their proximal by following their spouse, or entering a long-distance relationship. Long-distance relationships due to limited rural career opportunities have been found to result in depressive symptoms caused by lack of intimate moments, the inability to divide household chores, and extra pressure from spouse becoming head of the household (Tong et al., 2019). More general long-distance relationships have also been found to negatively impact wellbeing (Aryal et al., 2020; Orthner & Rose, 2009). This research demonstrates the necessity for regular feelings of love and belonging as determined by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 7). If the rural social worker values the love and belonging they receive from their relationship, should the spouse choose to move away they are likely to follow suit. Therefore, while the above participant has labelled spousal career opportunities as a pull to move to their rural community, it can also be labelled as a pull to remain. Thus, suitable employment for both the social worker and their spouse is essential to provide relationship security and employee retention.

Intimate relationships can further benefit when the individuals in the relationship have high self-esteem (Erol & Urth, 2016). This value is directly related to Maslow's highest levels of self-esteem and self-actualisation. High self-esteem and self-actualisation can come from being in a career that an individual loves, however, they can also be improved by being approached by external agencies for good work done. They also may be easier to attain in rural communities, where there is increased social interaction between community members as determined in the above subtheme. As such, one third of participants discussed rural headhunting and worker familiarity:

> *But living in a small community, you know, people will head hunt you because they know who you are, and they know how you work, and they hear the good and the bad stuff. So I feel pretty lucky that I was given the opportunity to jump into the role I am.* (Social Worker).

The above participant describes themselves as lucky, which suggests that they are motivated to excel in their work to repay their organisation for the opportunity. Job Characteristics Theory labels motivation as a work outcome, however, the theory is limited to internal job design. This means that it is unable to explain how headhunting can impact worker motivation. However, as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has also been directly related to worker motivation (see Gopinath, 2020; Stefan et al., 2020), the finding suggests that these models can be used together to understand headhunting, worker familiarity and retention in rural communities. Participant answers further suggested these opportunities grew confidence, achievement, spontaneity, and meaning within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 7). Such opportunities may therefore serve as a pull to stay in a rural community, albeit not in the organisation and so therefore they sit outside of the thesis question. The concepts of headhunting and worker familiarity warrant further investigation.

While headhunting will not be discussed further, the above participant stating that rural organisations hear the good and the bad of local professionals raises the points of rural gossip and trust. Rural literature discusses how word can travel fast in rural communities (Boilen, 2021; Daley & Pierce, 2011), and that rural social workers must remove themselves from local gossip to protect their practice (Munn & Munn, 2003) and stay secure in their position.

Should this not be properly mitigated, there is a risk of trust loss between social worker and kiritaki. Trust between a social worker and kiritaki is very important (Robbins & Cook, 2018), particularly in NZ rural communities where populations are resilient and self-sufficient (Humble et al., 2013; Pitt, 2016; Spector et al., 2018). As such, rural social workers need to consider the subjective energy costs that come with rural gossip and rebuilding trust once it is gone.

Theme Two: Work Conditions

The first theme has focused on the community surrounding the rural social worker. This second theme now focuses on the work environment. To ensure worker retention, it is important to have a healthy and supportive workplace that operates in the best interest of both the organisation and its staff (Ngozi & Edwinah, 2022; Shea, 2015; Shinta et al., 2023). Most participants had positive views of their workplace, however, two had more neutral views. This theme will discuss the subthemes of 'relationships in the workplace', 'implications of industry requiring registration', 'rural workplace structures', and 'work commute'.

Relationships in the Workplace

Workplace relationships play a crucial role in employee retention (Mossholder et al., 2005; Priyasad & Weerasinghe, 2017; Raj, 2023). They help to form a sense of belonging, in turn building trust and commitment (Esmond Naalu, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). This subtheme will discuss 'internal relationships', in terms of team relationships and organisational culture, and person-supervisor fit. 'External relationships' will then be discussed, which includes agency collaboration, funding for social services and pay.

Internal Relationships. Trust and commitment are important components of interal relationships in the workplace. They have a positive relationship with each other (Baştug et al., 2016; Yao et al., 2019) and employee retention (Wong & Wong, 2017), which means organisations should focus on building internal trust and commitment to increase employee retention. One way to do this is to have shared values with their employees (Akpa et al., 2021). This argument was reflected by most participants in the current study:

... I'm committed to the community. And, um, in the organisation I'm working for, I know is also committed to the community. So therefore my commitment to them is based on.. that. (Leader).

We've got a really cool team, of people that are all quite like minded, and.. kind of.. really have like strong.. views on... just- yeah, like supporting people, and.. doing the best we can for people, and.. have a really good like practice of reflection? And- and kind of checking in on.. our ethics, and.. making sure that we're practising really, um.. safely. (Social Worker).

Participants stating shared views and values aligns with the findings of Holmes et al. (2013) who found shared values and team links to increase embeddedness. These shared views can therefore also align with on-the-job fit, which Job Embeddedness Theory assumes to increase embeddedness and overall retention. In further support of this theory's contribution, the two participants who did not have shared values with the organisation viewed their work culture more neutrally, with one even speaking of their future plans to leave. Another participant who currently held shared values also associated them to voluntary turnover:

The push factor, though to me was if the... organisation.. that I was working for, without ethos, or, you know, didn't kind of match up. (Leader).

Following this same logic, participant shared views can then be labelled as pulls to stay with their organisation. It highlights the contribution of Push-Pull Theory to this subtheme, where shared views serve as either a push or pull and can impact participant decisions to stay or leave. Further pulls can be related to colleague relationships, which all participants determined were positive and important:

My support comes from my co-worker. Yeah. If we didn't- if we didn't have each other, life would be very unpleasant. (Social Worker).

I did apply for a different job when.. it wasn't clear that I could stay.. here, and that would have been in a team with just one other person. And... it didn't potentially feel like it was going to be the nicest kind of environment? And... it was nicer to have done

> *that, and then come back here and be like, okay now, it's nice here, we are all really passionate... We all work really hard.* (Social Worker).

Organisations can focus on building strong internal relationships by valuing cooperation and openness, and appropriately addressing issues (Lin & Guo, 2022). Trust also plays an important part in the building and maintenance of team relationships (Krot & Lewicka, 2012). These components all appear valued by participant organisations, albeit some more than others, as indicated by the first social worker above who otherwise views their workplace as 'unpleasant'. Participants viewing their team relationships positively aligns with previous literature (Burns et al., 2020; Evans & Huxley, 2009) and demonstrates that they all have strong on-the-job links. This may be related to the length of time in their organisation, which was a further consideration of Burns et al. (2020). Such strong on-the-job links in the form of team relationships can be viewed as building embeddedness and retention for participants and again highlights the contribution of Job Embeddedness Theory. The second extract further demonstrates the theory's contribution, with the social worker making the decision to not sacrifice their team relationships. In doing so, they are demonstrating on-the-job embeddedness which resulted in their retention rather than their turnover.

On-the-job links and sacrifice are important considerations for social workers, as they conduct work that requires a large energy demand. This can be combatted by team relationships, with strong relationships providing social (Stalker et al., 2007) and peer (Diamond & Jaye, 2020) support that can be perceived as rewards for staying with the organisation. Social Exchange Theory assumes that in an exchange, two parties must maximise their rewards and minimise their costs for long-term engagement (Homans, 1961, Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Because all participants received social and peer support from their colleagues, they can be viewed as maximising their rewards and therefore engaging in a positive transactional exchange with their organisation, which provides the environment for these relationships. In return, the organisation is receiving the time, skills, and knowledge from their employee due to their retention.

Additionally, social support has been identified as a job resource and found to aid job satisfaction (Jung et al., 2024). Positive colleague relationships, therefore, can also be associated with job resources. Following the assumptions of Job Demands-Resources Theory,

having strong team relationships increases the likelihood of resources outweighing demands. As such, positive work outcomes are a result, which can lead to an increased chance of retention. However, it may be harder for rural social workers to access social support from their team as they are often geographically spread (Nickson et al., 2016; Riebschleger, 2007):

> *But they're almost like, kind of family, I would say? Looking from the outside like they've got really strong.. connections, and friendships inside and outside of work. So yeah, that's lovely to see. And we do, here, to a degree. But yeah, definitely I noticed it more in the other office. So they're all kind of based there. But they definitely try- you know, we try our best to.. integrate. And we are one, you know, one organisation? And we do a daily.. zoom? So we're all yeah checking in in the morning and stuff. So yeah. So we don't feel as isolated perhaps, you.. yeah, as we could be.* (Social Worker).

It is important to keep trust in mind when there is team fragmentation, as it has been found to take longer to build due to members not being able to see each other regularly in person (Kujala et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2022). The finding therefore identifies that, whilst there are not necessarily negative emotions, team displacement still impacts participants and thus can be considered a push or a demand for NZ rural social workers. Social work leaders and supervisors can mitigate these negative impacts by promoting social support, trust and empowerment within their workplace that is suited to the individual needs of their staff (Alboroto et al., 2025; Collins, 2008). This is particularly important as it has been determined that staff within distributed teams view positive leadership differently to those who are co-located (Al-Ani et al., 2011). While the two participants who discussed geographical isolation were happy with the support they received from their leaders in the form of daily Zooms and interaction, leaders should still continue to make the effort so their isolated team members do not feel left behind.

Further regarding leader support, participant consensus determined that supervisors must be the right individual fit for the relationship to be effective. This consensus included the ability to have both casual and professional conversation, with the supervisor also needing experience in the area where the rural social worker was working:

> *And my supervisor is actually a social worker, amongst many other things, and she has worked the health field, so yeah. And also being someone separate from here? You know, that's- that's a great thing. Yeah. Because prior to working here, we had supervision, however, the supervisor we were going to was actually replaying what we'd said back to... our managers. So there wasn't a great deal- and then just refused to go after that. Whereas I feel completely safe with my... work.* (Social Worker).

The term person-supervisor fit, as coined by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005), has been used to represent the effective supervisory relationship. With all participants discussing its importance, person-supervisor fit can be determined as a key factor in addressing NZ rural social worker retention. Participants also appeared to identify that they receive positive oversight for their case load and felt safer in their practice when their supervision was tailored to them. This finding aligns with previous social worker (Geisler et al., 2019; Warwick et al., 2023) and rural social worker (Landsman & Rathman, 2022; Nickson et al., 2016) literature where effective supervision was deemed necessary to increase retention. As discussed in Chapter 1, supervision tailored to the needs of the individual can be linked to feedback in Job Characteristics Theory. Because participants were happy with their supervision, they are assumed to reach the psychological state of knowledge of work results, which leads to positive work outcomes and decreased turnover. In doing so, the frequency of discussion around person-supervisor fit shows the contribution of Job Characteristics Theory in understandings.

It has now been confirmed that to be effective, rural social worker supervision must align with the needs of the rural social worker. Social worker supervision must also maintain confidentiality (SWRB, 2021). However, as mentioned in Theme One, this maintenance can become an issue in rural communities where word travels fast. The above participant goes on to discuss how they left a prior organisation due to not feeling safe in their supervisory relationship following their supervisor replaying information to their manager. This participant can be observed to have experienced a confidentiality breach, a shock. Although a path cannot be determined, Unfolding Theory can be seen to contribute here, with the shock resulting in the voluntary turnover of the participant. The participant then chose to engage in external supervision to lower the likelihood of this scenario happening again. This was

further supported by another participant, who felt safer in their external supervisory relationship because they did not risk information coming back to their organisations.

Coincidentally, half of Group B stated they received external supervision. This was identified to directly strengthen their person-supervisor fit, despite the frequency of their sessions with their external supervisors being lower than that of those who solely had internal supervision. The finding aligns with previous NZ research which shows that social workers receiving less than the minimum fortnightly supervision benefitted from external supervisors (Beddoe et al., 2020). External supervision frequency varied between monthly to six-weekly supervision sessions for the three participants. For the remaining participants, internal supervision occurred every week or fortnight, with one participant who received external supervision also receiving regular internal supervision, thus meeting the minimum fortnightly requirement. Those who received more frequent supervision, on average, spoke highly of their supervisors and work environment compared to those with less frequent external supervision. However, the two participants receiving less than the fortnightly minimum also spoke highly of their supervisors and were not concerned about their session frequency. Therefore, following the assumptions of Job Demands-Resources Theory, effective supervision can be considered a job resource, however, it is a subjective term in relation to frequency.

Because social workers are required to have fortnightly supervision, following the assumptions of Social Exchange Theory, it will be a part of the psychological contract between social worker and organisation. Here, effective, external supervision can be labelled a reward, as it is not a requirement of ANZASW (2023). Additionally, effective, weekly supervision can also be a reward as it is more than the set fortnightly minimum. Supervision less than the fortnightly minimum can be associated with costs, despite these not being portrayed in the current study. Rather, for the two participants who received less frequent supervision, it can be assumed that the rewards from their person-supervisor fit are greater than their costs incurred through the infrequency. Therefore, rural social work organisations that allow for their staff to receive weekly or external supervision are in turn receiving the reward of happier employees, assisting in a positive transactional exchange and their retention. Not only does this outcome demonstrate the contribution of Social Exchange Theory, but also Push-Pull Theory, where the organisation allowing participants access to such supervision can be viewed as a pull to stay.

External Relationships. An on-the-job link commonly refers to being within the organisation that the employee works (Mitchell et al., 2001). External supervisors have been discussed under internal relationships as they are linked to general, internal supervision. However, for the purpose of this thesis, an external supervisor will be considered an on-the-job link as they have influence over the day-to-day work of a social worker. In the same sense, relationships with external agencies can also be considered on-the-job links. Research demonstrates that positive collaboration with external agencies is found in rural communities (Erdiaw-Kwasie & Alam, 2016; Kellstedt et al., 2021; Snavely & Tracey, 2000), and that organisational embeddedness in these communities can help to identify and address local gaps (Hadjielias et al., 2022). This suggests NZ rural social workers are likely to have strong on-the-job links from their external work with relevant kiritaki agencies, which also help in addressing local needs. In support, one third of participants viewed there as being more professional connection in rural areas:

> *There's more of a connection, um... with- so professionally, there's more of a connection with people who I might not work with directly, but other organisations. So you get to know people... um... that you might be referring people onto, or you know that, oh, maybe this organisation would be really good, you know, speaking with a client.* (Social Worker).

Agency collaboration is required to conduct effective social work in NZ (Oranga Tamariki, 2021). This participant found that because of their relationships with external agencies, they were able to better support their kiritaki. Thus, following Job Demands-Resources Theory, positive agency collaboration can be considered a job resource that can assist in outweighing job demands to build retention. The positive perspectives on rural agency collaboration also can be labelled a pull to stay working in the workplace and community, as participants are able to connect with other professionals to share work and knowledge. As such, the combination of Push-Pull Theory can also be confirmed, with these relationships assisting in net pulls outweighing pushes for associated employee retention.

While participants spoke positively of rural professional collaboration, these relationships have also previously been found to be negatively impacted due to competition for securing

funding in rural areas (Kellstedt et al., 2021; Snavely & Tracey, 2000). A recent NZ example comes from the identification that social service organisations are being grossly underfunded by the Ministry of Social Development (Jenkins, 2019). Additionally, funding cuts to the social work industry in particular have caused further distress for communities nationwide (Gibbens, 2024; Howell, 2024; Ignoe, 2024). These cuts pose an even larger threat to rural social service organisations where funding and resources are already limited (Pugh & Cheers, 2010; SSPA, 2019). As such, working for a rural social work organisation may result in added energy costs due to experiencing stress from funding. Participants defined lack of funding in terms of limited access to training and funded postgraduate study, and the inability to add additional community services. Job insecurity was also discussed:

> *... it's a bit of luck as well that we actually got funding. Because, you know, like, yeah, if we didn't, we didn't have enough funding obviously, then I would, yeah, I would have to look somewhere else. But luckily... it all worked out.* (Social Worker).

This participant appears to exhibit apprehension about the uncertainty of their place in their organisation, after deciding they would like to switch roles. Thus, this extract gives a brief insight into the costs that arise from such job insecurity. With Social Exchange Theory assuming that maximisation of costs can lead to a negative transactional exchange, funding and associated job insecurity therefore become important considerations in retention. This extract also poses the argument that involuntary turnover should be included when researching both NZ rural and general social worker retention. To combat this from happening, one leader spoke of needing to apply for different resourcing:

> Leader: *...because I think... social services in particular, I believe, need more security than what they've got. So I think it's a bit of both. Sometimes we end up tendering for contracts that we'd rather not... But we feel we have to. And I think if we had security, then we wouldn't be in that situation.*
>
> Researcher: *Yeah, almost like making yourself fit into something.*
>
> Leader: *Yes. I think, most NGOs.. have to do that at some stage or another.*

In NZ, while there is a need for new services in rural communities, their start-up would impact other local services due to the already low rural resources (Diamond & Jaye, 2020). The many participant comments on lack of funding further indicate that limited funding can be both a push and a job demand for rural social workers and may play into their decisions to stay or leave their organisation. These findings align with previous research on rural (Kearns et al., 2006) and urban (Tan et al., 2021) retention, suggesting that they are generalisable to the social work industry rather than rural social work organisations specifically.

Funding may be further limited due to the money required to cover the recent social worker pay equity scheme. From 1st July 2023, NZ social workers were given large pay increases relevant to their experience, as well as supplementary training for individual growth (SSPA, 2024). One third of participants discussed this pay equity, which suggests that pay is viewed positively, particularly in a rural community where a level, national pay makes rural home ownership even more attainable (Theme One: Accommodation). However, while two participants referred to it as a "dream" and a "reward", another thought they could still earn more elsewhere. While this participant's answer was not explored further, it does support the argument of Evans and Huxley (2009), who identified that social workers did not feel as though they were financially valued for their work. This participant perception also aligns with a push away from their workplace, and contributes to the net perceived pushes that, according to Push-Pull Theory, must be outweighed by pulls. For the other two participants, however, pay is neither a push nor a pull as they are of the understanding that they would receive the same pay should they move elsewhere. Here, Lee's (1966) neutral factors within Push-Pull Theory can be observed in action.

Implications of Industry Requiring Professional Registration

Pay equity and related funding for NZ social work organisations depend on the number of social workers employed with the organisation (Public Service Commission, 2023). To become registered as a NZ social worker, an individual is required to have completed either a Bachelor of Social Work, a Master of Applied Social Work, or a relevant S13 Experience Pathway[8]. Registration for practice has only become compulsory in 2021 (Ministry of Social

[8] A pathway which recognises the long-term service of an employee conducting work substantially similar to social work.

Development, n.d.), however, it plays a part in the creation of a social worker occupational community, as previously referred to by McAuley et al. (2006). Participant consensus determined that professional registration was positive for the industry. This consensus also provides some context for response regarding the challenges of finding registered staff to fill workplace vacancies:

> *I guess, having.... like that kind of qualified... people, here, you don't really have- is that the right word? Yeah. Like, yeah. Skilled! Yes. Skilled workers. You kind of have to.. I guess, think a bit outside the box, and.. yeah, and how you can get them.* (Social Worker).

This participant extract supports prior NZ research where it was deemed hard to find registered professionals to work in rural communities (Beeler et al., 2022; Daellenbach et al., 2020; George, 2023; Kearns et al., 2006). At its crux, these implications centre more on recruitment than retention. However, more related to the thesis question, one leader did associate lack of staff to low energy:

> *... when we were short staffed in the team, and we had a wait list, it was quite dr- I felt like I was a hamster on a wheel, just keeping up, and I didn't... have the energy... all the time, really, to go and do more.. team leader stuff, all the more- the networking stuff in the community, which I found really frustrating? And a little bit stressful. I don't think I fully understood that, though, until we had a few more bums on seats, because then I physically went, ahh. Now I can do these other interests.* (Leader).

This leader describes being stuck in an energy-draining cycle, trying to continue their work for their team and kiritaki while not recognising the impact it was having on their own health. Job Demands-Resources Theory states that if demands outweigh resources, the employee will exhibit poor work outcomes that can contribute to their later turnover (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Roodt, 2018). The extract provides an example of job demands outweighing resources, with the work outcomes being frustration, stress, and low energy. While the leader did not state they were considering turnover, had this cycle continued, they would have entered a state of burnout and thus been more likely to consider leaving their organisation. This poses the risk of a “snowball” voluntary turnover, with other staff leaving due to having to take on

more responsibilities to cover for the original person who left. This is particularly true when there is already low job embeddedness (Felps et al., 2009). Similarly, another leader spoke of the difficulty of finding rural practitioners:

> *... most of our staff are registered, some are.. working towards registration. It's really hard to have.. to get registered social workers to come here. So, um... I think supporting.. our people to be here, is, is really important*. (Leader).

Here, a similar thinking pattern is followed, with the extract confirming that the stress, a job demand, of finding registered staff is placed onto the leaders of NZ rural social work organisations. To mitigate this demand, the leader demonstrates creativity, a personal resource, by providing their staff the opportunity to work towards registration while employed as an unregistered professional. The leader's creativity follows the findings of Landsman and Rathman (2022), who found their participants hired based on work experience rather than qualifications so they could fill the number of required staff. Social Exchange Theory becomes relevant in this situation for unqualified workers, as they receive the reward of organisational support to support them through their registration pathway while they work. Likewise, for a rural social worker's psychological contract to be fulfilled, they must receive benefits, i.e. support, in return for their time, skills, and knowledge. Thus, while there are no additional rewards resulting from their organisation's support of unqualified professionals, there are also no added costs as the team has met their required minimum number. This still demonstrates a positive transactional exchange between rural social worker and organisation, which can result in their retention.

Organisational support was also highlighted as a pull in Push-Pull Theory (Chapter 1) and has been linked to the building of psychological capacity, i.e. personal resources, of employees (Avey et al., 2009). In the context of implications arising from registration, organisational support is important as it provides employees the confidence that their organisation believes in their academic and professional success. Thus, it gives an unregistered employee a reason to stay with their organisation once they are qualified. Thinking back to Theme One, an organisation will be more successful in retaining a rural worker who has a connection to and familiarity with their environment. Such professional opportunities can therefore be very important in rural communities, where local nga tangata likely do not have the required

degree to practice social work, but are happy to work towards it whilst employed. The leader is therefore contributing to the retention of future social workers, who, when qualified, will be pulled to stay with their organisation who provided support along their registration journey.

Rural Workplace Structures

Working relationships and registration implications have now been determined as important components of NZ rural social worker retention. However, participant interviews determined that workplace structures also play an important role. This subtheme discusses 'politics in large organisations' and 'growth over advancement' and their impact on NZ rural social worker retention.

Politics in Large Organisations. Organisational politics result in poorer work outcomes (Bedi & Schat, 2013; Letshaba & Chinomona, 2019) and staff turnover (Alsos et al., 2016). However, such politics can be mitigated by trust and social support (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmund, 2010) and have been linked to group cohesion and job embeddedness in smaller organisations (Coetzer et al., 2017). It could therefore be argued that larger organisations have a higher likelihood of experiencing organisational politics. As all participants discussed their team relationships positively, they can be viewed as experiencing little conflict in their close-knit teams. However, one third of participants did relate organisational politics to larger organisations:

> *There's always... a lot of... working for a large organisation there is always a lot of politics and things that are outside our control. So I suppose you can work out where your areas of influence can be and... and what things are worth pushing, um, and what things aren't so, um it's a bit like living in society really. There's plenty happening that you don't necessarily agree with. But you- well to live in society you've got to go along with it as long as it's not against your moral judgment, yeah.* (Leader).

> *So I've spent, the last... I've been here for a few years, and prior to that I worked in the top of the south. Now I loved working... in that... role, but like any big*

> *organisation, there's always politics and stuff like that. And I largely just stayed out of that because I was focused on my caseload.* (Leader).

These extracts present that organisational politics are not limited to urban organisations. As such, it can be argued that smaller rural organisations may not necessarily experience organisational politics. The second extract confirms this argument, with their enjoyment of working in a smaller organisation present throughout their interview. Thus, the smaller organisation in itself can be viewed as a pull to stay for the leader, as they do not experience organisational politics. In the case of the first leader, while politics in their large organisation can be viewed as a push, it is not outweighed by their net pulls to stay, which Push-Pull Theory assumes contributes to their retention. However, such politics can still be viewed as a job demand for the participant, which, following Job Demands-Resources Theory, must be outweighed by job and personal resources to avoid poor work outcomes and maintain retention. The same extract can identify "going along" as a personal resource of adaptability, which they utilise to overcome the initial shock of the politics in their larger organisation. In doing so, they have been able to maintain their retention. Here, Unfolding Theory can be seen to contribute to the answer the thesis question.

Growth Over Advancement. While organisational politics have now been determined to occur in larger rural social work organisations, these larger organisations also have the advantage of providing hierarchical career advancement opportunities for their staff. Thus, smaller organisations can be perceived to have less opportunities for growth. As discussed in Theme One, opportunities for growth in new organisations can lead to a heightened sense of self-esteem and self-actualisation within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Likewise, career growth within the same organisation can also lead to these same outcomes and thus contribute to retention. The social work industry is already known to have few opportunities for career advancement due to its structure (Turley et al., 2022), which likely makes it even more difficult to acquire a promotion in a smaller rural social work organisation, which can impact retention. This was discussed in the current study by one third of participants. However, rather than bringing a negative perspective, participants instead focused on the positives of growth in their current position:

> *There's not many.. different.. roles. So... that's- that's kind of one thing that.. I have it in the back of my mind? But at this point I'm like, Yeah, I think I'm just not worried about that. And probably that's because on the other side, there's so much room, and opportunity for us to develop as social workers? and just to be better at social working?* (Social Worker).

NZ social work education research has determined that final-year social work students have conflicting thoughts regarding their preparedness post qualification, yet held positive thoughts about the opportunities to grow in their future roles (Beddoe et al., 2018). This may explain why the findings from this thesis are different to previous literature on rural social worker (Brown et al., 2017) retention. The findings may also reflect strong job design, with leaders potentially providing high levels of skill variety, task identity, task significance, feedback, and autonomy to reach good work outcomes as assumed by Job Characteristics Theory. The above extract, for example, can be seen to focus largely on skill variety and feedback. These are assumed to lead to the psychological states of experienced meaningfulness and knowledge of work results, to then build the positive work outcomes of passion, motivation, performance, satisfaction, low absenteeism, and low turnover. Thus, the positive views on career growth from one third of participants demonstrates how job design can contribute to their retention.

Work Commute

Much the same as organisational politics and limited career advancement, commuting can also be perceived as a challenge in rural social work organisations (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012; Tao et al., 2019). Due to the geographical spread of rural communities, often rural nga tangata must commute further to work (Hansen et al., 2015) which produce both time and financial costs (Ha et al., 2020) that can contribute to turnover intent (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2016; Purba, 2015; Rombaut & Guerry, 2021). One third of participants discussed the commute to and from work in their interviews, with each driving between thirty and sixty minutes one way. All discussed financial cost, however, perspectives varied on the commute itself:

> *It's 40 minutes like it's a huge travel time, and huge cost as well, you know, gas wise. Um... so the reason why I applied to the other job was just because it was more local.*

> *It would have been 4 days a week. I- I would have had only like 50 or 70 bucks less, because here I pay for.. the travel.* (Social Worker).

> *...and I can stop at the river on the way home, which I have done on some difficult days, and let it go and ground myself, yeah. Mm.* (Social Worker).

For the first participant, commute is viewed as a job demand and a push away from their organisation. The time spent in the car, as well as the financial cost for petrol, can also be viewed as their costs. These negative views attributed to the participant considering accepting another job offer, thus demonstrating their impact on voluntary turnover. However, following Social Exchange Theory, while costs are higher staying in place, their rewards can be assumed to outweigh such costs and thus result in a positive transactional exchange. Additionally, the net pulls of the participant to stay in their current organisation can be observed as outweighing their net pushes, thus resulting in their retention through the contribution of Push-Pull Theory. Yet in the case of the second participant, commute contributed more to a pull due to the benefits of being able to take a breath in nature after work. This finding aligns with social worker self-care as mentioned in Theme One. As such, we can see Push-Pull Theory in both capacities due to the individual differences of the participants, with commute impacting them and their associated retention in varying ways. Here the findings of Landsman and Rathman (2022) are challenged, with them citing only negative views on commute to and from work.

As well as to and from work, social workers must also regularly commute during work hours to provide their mobile service. In rural areas especially, social workers are required to travel long distances to visit kiritaki during their workday (Pitt, 1998). However, such commute was only discussed by one participant, who had a positive view of it:

> *So... yeah. I don't do it every week, and if I don't feel like it, I definitely don't stay? It's kind of.. it's on my terms, I suppose.* (Social Worker).

It can be argued that the above participant has been provided with autonomy, which allows them to commute during work hours when it suits them. Autonomy is an important part of job design, with high levels contributing to the five key work outcomes of Job Characteristics

Theory and an increased chance of employee retention. The participant was very happy in their role and had no plans to leave, suggesting that they value this autonomy and therefore are more likely to stay with their organisation. Autonomy has also been deemed higher in rural social work organisations than urban (Riebschleger et al., 2015), which can suggest it is a pull for participants to stay working for a rural social work organisation. As such, the contribution of Push-Pull Theory on rural social worker commute can further be confirmed, which such autonomy contributing to the net pulls experienced by rural social workers.

Theme Three: Challenges and Opportunities

Both the community and workplace environments have now been discussed. However, the third and final theme is much more complex and undefined, as it focuses more on the individual perspectives of the participants. Challenges for rural social workers are defined as what can negatively impact their retention. Alternatively, opportunities for rural social workers are defined as what can positively impact their retention. The subthemes 'introvert tendencies', 'rethinking opinions on rural balance and workload', 'occupational commitment', and 'role versatility' will be discussed in relation to these challenges and opportunities as determined by participants.

Introvert Tendencies

The Big Five Personality Traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN; Goldberg, 1990) have been found to vary between urban and rural communities (see Atherton et al., 2024, Shuttleworth et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). In terms of extraversion specifically, previous research demonstrates challenging opinions, with some finding it higher in urban communities (Bala, 2023; Jokela, 2020), and some higher in rural (Fourage et al., 2019). Within the social work industry specifically, older research has found that social case workers are introverts compared to the more extroverted social group workers[9] (Frey, 1957). While participants were not asked to clarify what type of social worker setting they worked in, two similar, overarching comments were made by participants regarding individual tendencies:

[9] Social case workers provide more one-on-one support, where social group workers offer services to groups like youth groups, therapy groups, etc.

> *I am an introvert, well I'm saying if you walked into the office, you would know that we were all introverted? But our job makes us extroverted.* (Leader).

> *So, I don't have a lot of socialisation in my life. But that's something that I don't miss, ha ha ha! That's the thing about social work. We're fairly anti-social.* (Social Worker).

For the purpose of this thesis, an introvert is defined as a person who prefers to relax in their own company and is more likely to come home tired after a day of interacting with others (Cooper, 2013; Grant, 2017). In the context of the interview of the social worker, anti-social was viewed as them spending their time away from work with limited interaction outside of their immediate whānau. Taking a more latent approach to this particular data extract, I have grouped it with the above leader's comment on social work introversion. Most participants indirectly supported these two statements, describing themselves as relaxed, homebodies and chilled, with some even directly stating they were introverts. These characteristics have been grouped to form introvert tendencies and can be viewed as a challenge to retention for participants, as social workers are required to engage with people regularly due to the nature of their work. This perspective was explicitly discussed by one participant:

> *And I was like, yeah, I think I'm just, you know, like happy introvert, and... like going, you know, I don't- I don't want to go out much, and then.. she was like, well, but you work with people all week. And I was thinking, maybe I'm just an introvert in my own time, because I'm, you know, you have to be so outgoing and talkative the whole time? That.. when I'm at home, I just can't be bothered anymore.* (Social Worker).

Following the assumptions of Job Demands-Resources Theory, such regular interaction at work can be viewed as a job demand for an introverted social worker. This demand becomes amplified in a rural community, where rural social workers experience heightened social visibility as introduced in Theme One (Humble et al., 2013; Pugh & Cheers, 2010). It differs from previous literature, which associates negative perspectives with kiritaki interaction outside of work, rather than introverted tendencies (Kan & Klu, 2023; Wu & Chen, 2022). As Job Demands-Resources Theory assumes that job demands must outweigh job and personal

resources, participants must therefore consider how these job demands from kiritaki interaction both in and outside of their working hours will individually affect them and their retention.

However, the common finding of such characteristics may further confirm the relevance of Landsman and Rathman's (2022) findings, where a "certain type of person" can extend to both the local environment (Theme One) and introvert tendencies. With most participants fitting this thesis' description of an introvert and enjoying their surrounding environment, it could be argued that introverted social workers find solace in a rural community. This is also because there are qualities of urban life that may make it harder for introverted social workers to "shut off" after work due to a larger population with more activities and general noise (Jacobs & Appleyard, 2015). Therefore, social workers who require that time to shut off after work have the opportunity to stay working in a rural community where life is slower paced. Following Diogo's argument, if a pull is perceived as strong, it will increase the likelihood of long-term residence (2024). Thus, Push-Pull Theory can contribute to the retention of introverted participants and rural social workers where the quieter community is viewed as a pull to stay. Additionally, the introverted participants may find themselves to fit more with the quieter, slower paced rural community, which they would have to sacrifice should they move to a busier urban community. Here, Job Embeddedness Theory is identified to contribute, where participants have built off-the-job fit and sacrifice within their rural community, improved their off-the-job embeddedness and overall retention.

Rethinking Opinions on Rural Balance and Workload

Such introvert tendencies may have an impact on the work-life balance of participants, with participants mostly choosing to relax by themselves after work. Many participants also discussed being able to switch off from work and keep it separate from home. However, some also discussed their crossover:

> *So I- I consider so I consider social work a lifestyle, not a- not a job. Now, if people consider it a job there's nothing wrong with them doing that, because I have colleagues that do that, and actually being able to separate your... work, and your professional life, I think, is important. You need to know the boundary, and of course,*

> *if you've got them both in separate boxes, it's much easier to separate, and if they.. sort of overlap, mine overlap.* (Leader).

Rather than requiring separation from work and life, this participant feels they are more fulfilled by combining them both. In their interview they go on to mention their involvement in community groups, which, as discussed in Theme One, can have an impact on the navigation of professional relationships in rural communities. This extract paints an interesting picture of boundaries and rural social work. While interaction with kiritaki and other rural nga tangata can be viewed as challenges for participants, it can also be associated with an opportunity for this participant to continue the work they are passionate about. As such, work-life balance will vary dependent on the individual perspective of the rural social worker. It therefore points to there being different ways to navigate work and life to ensure retention, bringing varying understandings when attempting to answer the thesis question.

What can be universally agreed upon, however, is that workload and working hours play a large part in work-life balance (Bridges & Searle, 2011; Hsu et al., 2019; Tresna et al., 2024). Rural work in NZ has previously been associated with higher workloads (Beeler et al., 2022), which could be assumed to impact work-life balance. However, when workload was raised by one third of participants, it was viewed as manageable. Workload was also compared to those in statutory services:

> *I find a whole lot less.. demanding. And I find it.. yeah, less demanding than.. for instance, working in the care and protection field.* (Social Worker).

> *I also think of my past kind of experience in statutory, and obviously that's very different, and you can't really.. you kind of have to, you know, respond, and you have to take.. cases? And I worked in the front end team, so sometimes our caseloads were really high. So here it's different, because they wouldn't really do- like we have a wait list. They wouldn't kind of put it onto us if we haven't got capacity.* (Social Worker).

These findings challenge the findings of previous research, which has found rural social work to have higher workloads than their urban counterparts (Landsman & Rathman, 2022; Whitaker et al., 2006). However, they indirectly support the argument that urban social

workers have high workloads (Evans & Huxley, 2009; Warwick et al., 2023). Manageable workloads, and regular mention of kiritaki waitlists, could therefore be considered pulls to stay employed in their rural organisation for the participants, as they may have higher workloads elsewhere. Following Push-Pull Theory, these manageable workloads could contribute to net pulls outweighing pushes and thus assist in the rural social workers retention. In the same sense, by leaders maximising participant rewards through providing a waitlist and manageable workloads, they are upholding their psychological contract with the participants. This leads to a positive transactional exchange between the two parties, where the participants are seen to maximise their rewards and minimise their costs compared to urban and statutory work. Thus, Social Exchange Theory can also be seen to contribute to NZ rural social worker workload.

By providing manageable workloads, participant organisations can be viewed as offering organisational support to their staff. This support can be associated with a job resource for the participants, and assists in helping job and personal resources to outweigh demands. Additionally, it was interesting that participants did not negate the demands of their work, but rather put them into perspective by comparing them to previous work experiences. Further coping strategies were also discussed, like reading a book, speaking with a supervisor, and riding the "roller coaster":

> *And with social work I learned early on as well, it's kind of is like a roller coaster? You kind of- some days you're.. kind of maxed out, and.. things are taking... priority. You've got a crisis to manage. And then, you know, other days you've got time and space. So yeah, I kind of just yeah, kind of ride it. If that makes sense. Ha ha.* (Social Worker).

This participant brings attention to the changing responsibilities of a social worker in terms of what is occurring for their kiritaki at one time. By riding the roller coaster, they can be viewed as maintaining a balance to continue their work while best suiting their personal needs. As such, the reference to being "maxed out" may not necessarily result in this participant's burnout due to there being an oscillating balance. However, despite this balance, there is potential for secondary and vicarious trauma to contribute to this maxed out state. Secondary trauma results from being indirectly exposed to a traumatic event, while vicarious

trauma results from separate instances of secondary trauma that accumulate over time (Rauvola et al., 2019). Due to the nature of their work, social workers are frequently exposed to both. For example, secondary trauma may result from a social worker being with their kiritaki while they experience a traumatic event in real-time. This then has the potential to become vicarious trauma when combined with other traumatic experiences. It is therefore important for social workers to have organisational support and a manageable workload so they can better overcome such exposure. Without these resources, a balance is unlikely to be found, with the potential for both secondary and vicarious trauma to compound into poor work outcomes such as compassion fatigue and burnout (Rauvola et al., 2019).

Burnout has previously been stated as a job demand using Job Demands-Resources Theory assumptions (Tan & Yeap, 2022; Tan et al., 2021) and is commonly associated with workload and low energy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and rural practitioner turnover (Adarkwah et al., 2018; Benson et al., 2016; Haywood et al., 2024). Whilst low energy was discussed by two thirds of participants, it was not often discussed in present tense. This finding challenges previous literature (Brown et al., 2017; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Thomas, 2013; Maddock, 2024). It also further suggests that participants have the required resources to adapt with any related secondary and vicarious trauma, which contribute greatly to their retention.

Occupational Commitment

When an employee subjectively has work-life balance and a manageable workload, they will likely have more energy and feel more positively about, and be more committed to, their role. Occupational commitment is a term that can be used to explain this outcome. When an employee is committed to the work they are completing, work passion (Ahadiat & Dacko-Pikiewicz, 2020; Chen et al., 2020) and long-term retention (Meyer & Espinoza, 2016) can also result. Astakhova et al.'s (2024) sixth work outcome of passion has been included in the work outcomes of Job Characteristics Theory for the purpose of this thesis. Passion increases motivation, meaning for work, and occupational commitment. However, it can also lead to negative patterns that stop the employee from leading a balanced life (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 756). It has been found that passion has a relationship with burnout (Chen et al., 2020; Curran et al., 2015; Tzioti et al., 2024), with the latter observed in the above subtheme.

However, participant consensus viewed passion as positive. This finding supports Daellenbach et al. (2020), who determines passion to be a driving factor of NZ rural midwife retention. Therefore, just as burnout can be labelled a poor work outcome, passion can be labelled as both a personal resource and positive work outcome depending on the context. Thus, Job Demands-Resources Theory can be used to interpret this subtheme, with passion contributing to outweighing low energy demands associated with burnout and rural social work.

Participants staying in their role provides them the opportunity to continue to work in a field they are passionate about. All participants were committed to their role, discussing satisfaction and passion resulting from their work. These findings were related back to participants having the opportunity to provide a service to their rural community:

> *And when I first went to study, it was about me going away to learn to bring back a skill and support, um, the community I grew up in.* (Social Worker).

This participant is seen to be demonstrating occupational commitment to rural social work, by being committed to providing a social work service to their rural community. Not only were they pulled back to their community to complete their goal, but they are also now pulled to stay so they can continue to provide their service. Thus, Push-Pull Theory can be used to interpret this extract. Further confirming the contribution of this theory was participants stating the significance of delivering a rural service:

> *We.. *absolutely* need - *my* belief, and it's only my opinion - is that we actually need *each* and every service that we've got. We need *more*. But we need to *keep* at least *everything* that we've got. Because *I* do believe that with.. *diminishing* services, organisations, and communities when *they* become isolated. And then who's monitoring our children? And so *they're* not receiving the monitoring they need. Families are *not* receiving the support they need.* (Leader).

From this data extract, it can be confirmed that there is a high level of task significance within rural social work. The finding further supports Theme One: Rural Vulnerability and that of Beeler et al. (2022) by highlighting that there is a shortage of local services that

operate in NZ rural communities. As such, the leader is pulled to stay in their organisation to provide support to their local, vulnerable nga tangata. Additionally, challenging other NZ research (Adams & Carryer, 2019; Kearns et al., 2006), participants did not view the responsibility to deliver their service as negative. This finding suggests they also understand and experience the responsibility that comes with delivering such a service. However, rather than this responsibility coming from autonomy as assumed by Job Characteristics Theory, it comes from task significance. Thus, Job Characteristics Theory may be extended for NZ rural social workers, so that the core characteristic of task significance can build both experienced responsibility and meaningfulness. Both of these psychological states cement the value of job design for participants, and thus can contribute to their retention through the five work outcomes.

Role Versatility

Job design can also explain this subtheme of role versatility. Overall, participants were happy in their workplace, with two thirds having regular opportunities to incorporate additional work into their daily tasks that they were passionate about. Examples included tasks in outdoor education and group work for rural social worker participants, and both management and kiritaki case load for leaders. This role versatility was spoken about positively:

> *I like working for a smaller organisation because... even though here one of us will do half a dozen jobs, if you go to the bigger sites like in Canterbury or in Dunedin, you know, they've got half a dozen people doing one job. So there's swings and roundabouts for that. I think sometimes if you're working in big organisations, you kind of get lost.. in that? And it is a big system that just keeps rolling along? Whereas here, it's... it's more like a family. And um, working more.. closer, I guess, to help out the community, yeah.* (Leader).

> *Um... I... am feeling more satisfied recently because I have... started a new piece of work, which is kind of a new client pool that's opened up for... myself, and a new field of learning. So that is really exciting, and it has.. ignited some- some passion... for my work, which is great*. (Social Worker).

Thus, this role versatility can be seen as a pull for participants to stay in their current position. Interestingly, multiple relationships within the organisation were viewed positively, which challenges the findings of Beddoe et al. (2020) where it was deemed unhelpful. However, the findings do confirm the assumption of Job Characteristics Theory, where passion results from skill variety in the day-to-day work of the rural social worker. Work days for social workers are highly variable, with previous research determining that rural social workers were more likely to report broader caseload vulnerability (Whitaker et al., 2006). Participants discussed this in their practice, stating they worked in many different areas including health, relationships, housing, and advocacy:

> *Um.. working [rural], it's probably a little bit more elaborate than that, because you do everything; you offer options... you know, you're not only a social worker who's providing support, where to go, doing- helping people do things. It's far wider here, right down to, like... taking people home, for example, you know, during your workday, because we don't have the public transport. Locals are very easy to work with, you know, people that reside here? But we have a lot of travelling people here, and sometimes you spend a lot of time damping down their opinions of what they should have. Um.. we do everything like I do talks to different teams, do talks... You know, on what social work do? We do basically everything. So not only social work. But all the other little bits that... because there's so few of us.* (Social Worker).

Participants perceiving role versatility as a reward for staying in their rural social work organisation demonstrates a job resource and a positive transactional exchange, where the organisation is rewarded with rural social worker retention. This finding aligns with a comment of George (2019), where 'rural generalism' was found to be common among NZ allied health professionals. Munn and Munn (2003) argued that rural social workers were more likely to stay with their organisation if they were in a more generalist position, with the same findings occurring in NZ rural practitioner research (Adams & Carryer, 2019; Daellenbach et al., 2020). More related to retention, it is commonly argued that exposure to specific rural education during study prepares social work students better for rural employment, increasing the chances of retention (Mackie, 2007; Riebschleger et al., 2015; Warren et al., 2014). Additionally, exposure and adaption to work-related shocks over time may decrease social worker burnout (Schwartz et al., 2007). By working in a rural social

work organisation, participants are provided with the opportunity to work in a generalist position and be exposed to workload shocks that may occur more frequently due to the variety and related vulnerability of the work conducted. Should they have access to prior training, they may be better able to adapt to such shocks which help to secure their retention.

Summary

This chapter has detailed the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis, which centred on the three themes of community embeddedness, work conditions, and challenges and opportunities. Each theme was analysed using the six selected theories to determine how each contributed to NZ rural social worker retention. According to participant responses, their community environment is just as important than their workplace. This finding centred not only on the personal connection and characteristics of participants, but also the impact rural life had on the vulnerability of kiritaki. Responses further identified workplace relationships, supervision and passion as integral to NZ rural social worker retention. The following chapter will discuss these findings in more depth, providing recommendations for rural social work organisations to improve the long-term retention of their social workers. It will also include strengths and limitations of the current study, and directions for future research.

Chapter 4

Discussion

Towards a Holistic Understanding

The underlying goal for this thesis is to provide a starting point for future research on NZ rural social worker retention. To do so, the thesis question became, "how do organisational psychology theories contribute to the retention of social workers in rural communities of NZ's, predominantly rural, South Island?" This study determines that to promote retention, it is essential that NZ rural social workers become embedded in both their community and workplace. However, embeddedness is not only limited to links, fit, and sacrifice; it can now also be defined as having pulls to, and rewards, links and resources in, the surrounding environment.

Participants largely became embedded in their community through community relationships, with these factors likely assisting in keeping a high level of mental wellbeing. The social support provided by whānau, friend, spouse, pet, and community group connection likely also assisted in separating work from life, particularly on harder days that were mentioned by participants. While the local environment is observed to add to workload severity through geographical isolation, lack of services, and associated lower staff numbers, participants speaking so highly of it suggests that these negatives are actually outweighed by the positives of what the community provides in terms of nature, activities, and relationships. These findings argue the point that for rural social workers who do have emotionally demanding workloads, time outside and with others for self-care is essential to maintain their retention. This is particularly important for those with introverted tendencies, i.e. most participants, for their self-care and boundaries are what enables them to continue coming to work to give their all for their kiritaki. However, what really stands out is participant commitment to their role and their community, which was not altered by rural vulnerability as was initially believed. Yet even with this commitment, retention can still be viewed as challenged by supervisor confidentiality breaches, limited shared values, low staffing, and organisational politics. Surprisingly though, findings suggest that participants value their community as much as, if not more than, their workplace, and will continue to stay living in their community but just look for further jobs should their retention be challenged in any way. With headhunting also

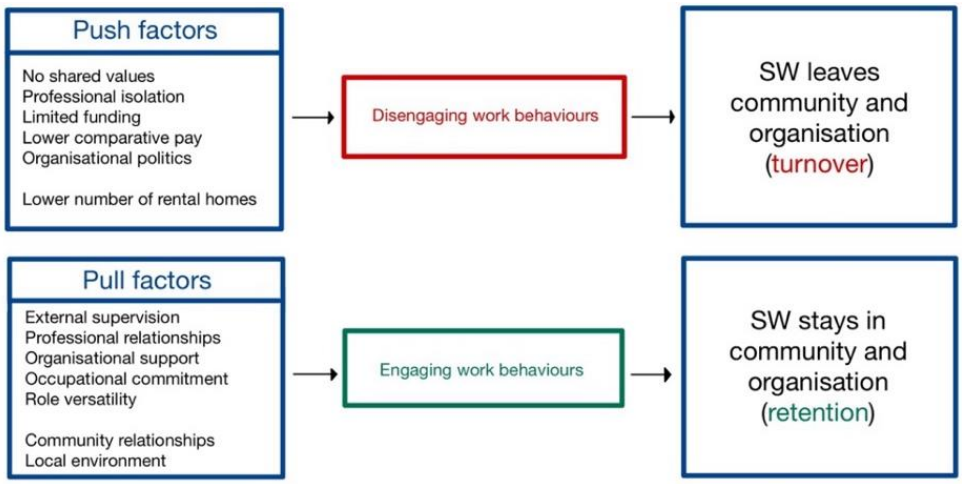
discussed in answers, it is even more important that organisations ensure their retention strategies align with the needs of their staff.

Pushes and Pulls

The findings from this study suggest that pushes for NZ rural social workers are universal, while pulls depend on individual factors and suitability to the rural environment. There were also many more pulls identified within the reflexive thematic analysis than pushes, which can explain the mostly positive opinions participants had on remaining within their workplace. NZ rural social work retention strategies should, therefore, utilise Push-Pull Theory to focus on building and maintaining pulls within the workplace. Team relationships and associated positive organisational culture were determined pulls by all participants (Figure 7), which suggests that organisations could include frequent team communication and activities to increase retention. This is particularly true for organisations operating in displaced teams who may feel removed from their colleagues. Further strategies within the control of the organisation include continuously ensuring the rural social worker is happy within their work environment, whether this be through providing new work opportunities, external supervision, or a manageable workload as discussed by participants. As this type of pull is more subjective, it is important for the organisation to foster a relationship with their rural social workers to understand their perspectives and needs. It is also important the organisation does this genuinely and respectfully, to avoid the process being viewed as a tick-box exercise and thus serve more as a push. An example of implementing this strategy is to have one-on-one checks in with staff in the mornings upon starting work, and making the effort to be a part of the general office rather than being separated at the other end of the building.

Figure 8

Pushes and Pulls within NZ Rural Social Work



Note. This diagram has adapted Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966; McAuley et al., 2006) to fit the context of NZ rural social worker retention.

While organisations cannot control the community pulls that were identified by participants, it is important they still keep these in mind as they are likely also heavily contributing to the retention of the social worker. For example, membership in community groups can be considered a pull to stay (Figure 7), so organisations may choose to support involvement in such groups during work hours. Not only would this promote connection to the community, but also a pull to stay with the organisation, who may benefit in turn from the social worker's regular presence and built trust in their rural community. With home ownership now considered a pull, and limited rentals now considered a push, retention strategies may also choose to support employee flexibility, where staff can organise tradespeople or attend rental viewings during work hours, providing their work is still being completed. Enjoyment of the local community was also a pull for all participants. Therefore, retention strategies could encourage team days in nature, or going to a beach or river after work on a Friday. Strategies could also include encouragement for staff to go to the beach or for a walk whenever it is needed, to maintain mental health and avoid burnout. Again, it is important these do not become viewed as tick-box exercises, and management should lead by example. It is only this way that these retention strategies will contribute to net pulls outweighing pushes, and for the rural social worker to stay with their organisation.

Costs and Rewards

Costs and rewards are less frequent than pushes and pulls within the data set. However, it can be argued that external supervision, manageable workloads, and skill variety maximise participant rewards and thus assist in their retention. Based on these findings, it is suggested retention strategies focus on minimising the subjective costs associated with higher workloads, and continue to provide opportunities for variety and growth in rural social work. In return, they will maximise organisational rewards of high engagement and retention for a positive transactional exchange with their employees. Rural social work organisations and leaders should also keep in mind the energy costs that are associated with a lack of funding. This is particularly important with a lack of staff explicitly stated to negatively impact energy levels through an associated higher workload (Theme Two), not to mention the impact on positive organisational culture described by participants should they lose their or a team member's position to funding cuts. Thus, retention strategies should include keeping communication open around funding, providing this is the choice of the individual employee. This will help in building their security in their position.

As holistic security is a basic human right, it cannot be considered a reward for living in a rural community. However, emotions associated with community and spouse connection, cheaper housing, and social support, as identified within the reflexive thematic analysis, can be. Thus, to maximise rewards and minimise costs, retention strategies may benefit from consistently expressing the importance of community exchanges for social worker self-care. While this value is ever-present in work with kiritaki, as discussed by one participant, a rural social worker may also benefit from regular reminders from their leaders to place value on their own self-care. In a similar sense, retention strategies should also focus on providing effective supervision that is relationship-based to build a personal and professional connection, which can also help identify when a self-care reminder is needed. These factors together will help organisations to fulfil their psychological contract with employees and thus maintain their retention.

Shocks and Adaptability

In terms of Unfolding Theory, retention for participants appeared to be impacted by shocks more so than general dissatisfaction. Kiritaki interaction outside of work hours, a supervisor sharing trusted information, organisational politics, and work exposure over time were all

observed to have an impact on participants. However, outside of the sharing of confidential information, all scenarios were adapted to by participants. These findings suggest that adaptability plays a role in ensuring NZ rural social worker retention. Because adaptability is a personal characteristic, organisations do not have as much leeway in positively influencing it. Instead, organisations can focus on providing a supportive team environment to lower the requirement of rural social worker adaptability. Thus, it is suggested retention strategies focus on open communication to mitigate organisational politics while maintaining effective and confidential supervision to avoid voluntary turnover. This is particularly important to help rural social workers adapt to shocks they come across in their work with vulnerable nga tangata.

Connection and Fit

The reflexive thematic analysis suggests that the value of on-the-job and off-the-job links are high for participants, with most acknowledging they contribute to keeping them in place. Thus, shocks can be more easily adapted to when support is received from on-the-job and off-the-job links. Additionally, while on-the-job fit can grow through shared values, based on frequency of discussion it is identified that participants value off-the-job fit more. This finding can be linked to overwhelming participant compatibility with the surrounding environment, and also the large number of introverted tendencies which appear to be better matched with rural communities. As such, while retention strategies can choose to focus on the improvement of on-the-job embeddedness, it would be more helpful to provide staff with regular opportunities to access and interact within the surrounding community. In doing so, they will be able to strengthen off-the-job links and fit to increase off-the-job sacrifice and thus improve the chances of retention. However, on-the-job embeddedness should not be discarded, particularly with one participant associating on-the-job links to their reason to not follow another job opportunity. Thus, retention strategies should also continue to foster strong workplace relationships and connection through regular team discussion and providing an “open-door policy” as mentioned by leaders.

Job Design

This open-door policy will also contribute to feedback and autonomy, as mentioned by Job Characteristics Theory. The positive discussion around these two job characteristics, as well

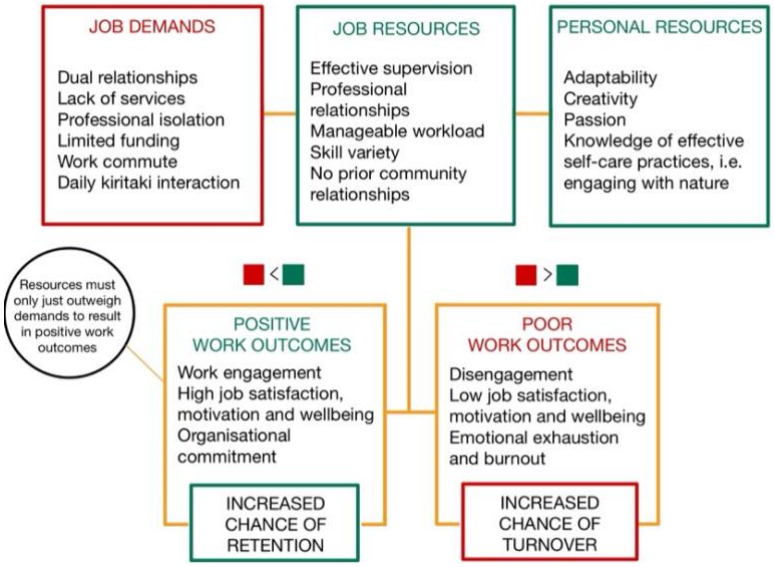
as skill variety and task significance, demonstrates that job design plays an important role in NZ rural social worker retention. It is also now known that work outcomes of passion, satisfaction and motivation grow from new work opportunities aligning with personal interests, which further supports the assumptions of Hackman and Oldham (1976) and Astakhova et al. (2024). Therefore, retention strategies should focus on understanding underlying staff passions and incorporate these into the workplace by adjusting or adding to job descriptions. In doing so, organisations will be tailoring the work to the wants and needs of their social workers. The three psychological states of experienced meaningfulness, responsibility, and knowledge of results were not as frequent within the data set, however, which argues that these remain internal to the social worker and are not witnessed by others. To ensure these states are being met, it is therefore also important for organisations to ensure the style of supervision, or feedback, aligns with the needs of the social worker. This will help to build trust and knowledge of work results for the social worker, and give them the opportunity to discuss how their passions and motivations can align with their work. Absenteeism and turnover will be lowered as a result, leading to the improvement of organisational retention.

Demands and Resources

NZ rural social worker retention can also be improved following the assumptions of Job Demands-Resources Theory. From participant interviews, it is observed that NZ rural social worker demands centre on more permanent factors, like work commute and professional isolation, rather than what leaders can change, like workload (Figure 8). Thus, to improve retention, ownership may point to rural social workers to understand how these job demands individually impact them prior to applying. Should they believe these factors will have negative impacts on their long-term retention, it may be worth looking elsewhere for work. This is particularly important in the current context as rural communities require a large level of trust to operate successfully in, which is negatively impacted by staff comings and goings. However, organisations should also explore further job resources to balance these permanent demands. In the case of work commute, for example, a job resource could come from the organisation allowing their staff to drive their work car home, or by allowing their staff to work from home when possible. This would ensure the rural social worker is not fronting either the associated financial or time cost, thereby lowering overall demands.

Figure 9

Demands, Resources and Work Outcomes within NZ Rural Social Work



Note. This diagram has adapted Job Demands-Resources Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to fit the context of NZ rural social worker retention.

The assumption that poor work outcomes result from resources largely outweighing demands (Demerouti et al., 2001) did not appear relevant for participants, whose responses centred on positive work outcomes like motivation and commitment, rather than boredom. This finding suggests that their organisations mostly provide environments where their staff have what is deemed to be the "right" amount of job and personal resources to outweigh their job demands. This is also true for participants who were not as committed to their organisation, with their personal resource of adaptability playing a large role in their overall resources outweighing demands. However, rural social work organisations should not be overly reliant on these personal resources as they alone do not singularly equate to retention. Rather, organisations can provide organisational support through offering manageable workloads and skill variety (Figure 8). The participants who received this support had no plans to leave their organisations, which suggests that organisations that provide such support will benefit from the positive work outcomes of high engagement, satisfaction, and commitment. Providing the option of external supervision is a further example of organisational support, as it allows for the rural social worker to access a supervisor they will not find locally and feel secure in their work. In providing their staff access to these job resources, organisations will have a higher chance of their retention.

Strengths and Limitations

This thesis aims to address the literature gap by determining the contribution of organisational theories to NZ rural social worker retention. With the large majority of participants presenting as female, this aligns with previous research stating that the social work industry is female-dominated, and thus strengthens the credibility of the study. However, the study methodology poses several constraints due to the time associated with editing, coding, and analysing participant transcripts. First, I have been unable to include more participants, nor include the fourth organisation as mentioned in Chapter 2, which means that my results become less transferrable to the experiences and perspectives of all NZ rural social workers and social work leaders. However, by utilising semi-structured interviews, I am better able to address the literature gap by providing more detailed versions of participant perspectives and experiences as discussed in Chapter 1. My findings therefore provide a starting point for future research in the same area.

In choosing this methodology, I ensured that confidentiality was protected before, during and after the research process. However, I did not prepare for participants to break their own confidentiality, which was discovered during interviews where some participants discussed their colleagues' involvement in the research. While participants appeared to voluntarily engage in such discussions outside of the research environment, it highlights a major ethical limitation of the study design. Research in rural communities will always differ from research in urban communities due to the heightened social visibility (Pugh & Cheers, 2010) and varying community relationships within rural nga tangata. Living in a rural community myself, I should have been more aware of confidentiality concerns and the potential for discussion among participants, which could soon spread to the rest of the rural community where the participant worked and resided. Should I repeat this study, I will have further, in-depth discussions with participants regarding their own role in maintaining their personal confidentiality. I will also provide examples of potential consequences for confidentiality being broken, such as kiritaki coming about personal information of their social worker they would not professionally be privy to. These discussions will be supplemented with additional information on the Information Sheet and Consent Form so participants also must visually confirm they understand these consequences.

Future Direction

As this thesis appears to be the first of its kind within NZ, it will be beneficial to conduct this study in the North Island to see if results are similar across the nation. NZ is a small country, yet our islands differ drastically. For example, despite being smaller than the South Island, the North Island holds 75% of the nation's population (Stats NZ, 2023), which suggests a change in the future study's definition of rural may be required. Further cultural differences will also likely result in a different participant sample and thus may produce findings that can be compared to the current study.

Future research will also benefit from conducting this study on a wider scale, potentially through the use of an online, qualitative survey for rural social workers and rural social work leaders across the nation. A qualitative survey is an online, structured interview and is taken when the participant chooses (Braun et al., 2021). This method would allow more organisations to take part in the study, and therefore provide a wider range of NZ rural social worker and leader perspectives and experiences. In doing so, results will be more transferrable to the general NZ rural social worker population. An online, qualitative survey would also minimise participant prompting by having set questions (Braun et al., 2021), allowing questions to be more specific to the topic and selected theories. Additionally, use of a survey would allow a larger number of questions to be asked, meaning the theories could be explored in more depth. Job Characteristics Theory and Unfolding Theory in particular would benefit from additional questions due to the theories holding many variables in comparison to Push-Pull Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, and Job Demands-Resources Theory. Alternatively, for a more streamlined study, it is suggested future research explore Push-Pull Theory and/or Job Demands-Resources Theory which this thesis has found to contribute the most to NZ rural social worker retention.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to address the literature gap and need for long-term NZ rural social worker retention, an issue that becomes more pressing each year. In summary, all six theories of Push-Pull Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Unfolding Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, Job Characteristics Theory and Job Demands-Resources Theory were observed to contribute to such retention. The positives of staying in place outweigh the negatives for most participants, with pulls, rewards, links, fit, sacrifice, job resources and personal resources

regularly identified. Adaptability is also observed as important, with rural social workers needing to adjust to community related shocks and demands as well as the emotional shocks and demands arising within the social work environment. This study aligns with international research by labelling both community and workplace embeddedness as essential in retention, which can be improved through the pulls, rewards, resources and sacrifice of whānau connection, nature, security, relationships, and occupational commitment. As such, retention strategies should focus on the community alongside the workplace. Social workers should also consider the how demands like professional isolation, commute, and kiritaki interaction outside of work hours will impact them prior to accepting an offer in a rural community. In regards to future research, this thesis has determined that it is essential to place value on confidentiality in rural areas and how this can impact the research process. It is hoped future research will explore and extend these findings, with suggestions made to investigate the North Island, or conduct a survey for a larger participant sample.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email to Leaders within Rural Social Work Organisations

Kia ora

My name is Andrina Butler, and I am a Master of Science (Industrial and Organisational Psychology) student at Massey University. I am doing my research looking at: *Investigating Social Worker Retention and Sustainability Within Rural Areas in Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island.*[10]

I am looking for social work management, and any registered social workers working under them, who would like to offer their knowledge and time to partake in this study. It is estimated that there will be a 15-minute meeting explaining the study in more detail prior to giving consent, and then a 60-minute interview. This roughly corresponds to about 75 minutes overall although you are very welcome to offer more of your time.

The interview will be recorded (audio only) via Zoom. Questions will be about supervision, practice, past experiences, and personality. Some discomfort may arise from recalling answers to questions; I will ensure that we work in partnership together to make the interview process as comfortable for you as possible.

If you are interested, please feel free to email or phone back so we can schedule a meeting. I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have.

Ngā mihi,
Andrina Butler
[redacted]
[redacted]

[10] Title change for thesis occurred after providing appendices.

Appendix B: Participant Forms

Investigating Social Worker Retention and Sustainability Within Rural Areas in Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island

INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher Introduction
This thesis is a requirement for a Master of Science in Industrial and Organisational Psychology at Massey University. The researcher, Andrina Butler, is looking to investigate social worker retention and sustainability within rural communities in Aotearoa's South Island.

Project Description and Invitation
You are invited to participate in a research study investigating social worker retention and sustainability within rural communities in the South Island. The main aim of the research is to identify what could be done to keep social workers working in rural communities in the South Island. This research aims to involve social work organisations in rural communities with a total population of 10,000 or less, and have been operating for the last five years at minimum. Participants will be managers and registered social workers who work in these settings.

Participant Identification and Recruitment
You are invited to participate in this study if you currently are an active, registered social worker, or manager of a social work organisation that fits the criteria above. Your organisation will be identified by local community groups in your area for the researcher to approach.

Project Procedures
If you are a social worker partaking in the study, your manager may put this Information Sheet out for you to choose to join the study. Participation time allowance will include 15 minutes for an explanation of the study, and a further 60 minutes for the interview, with the option to go over this should you choose. Questions will include being asked about your personality (who you are as a person). During your audio-recorded interview, the researcher will ensure full partnership with you to build a comfortable setting. This may include you choosing the place of your interview, involving outside support, taking breaks, and/or changing conversation as needed. Websites such as Calm (https://www.calm.com) and Headspace (https://www.headspace.com) also provide free trials which the researcher is happy to support you with.

As the researcher also works in the social work field, participants will not be recruited from her workplace, nor will individuals who have a personal relationship with the researcher. To further mitigate any conflict of interest, any professional relationships will be disclosed, and steps will be taken to minimise bias or undue influence to reduce the special relationship impact.

Data Management
Your name and other personal information will not be noted, with audio recordings randomly assigned a pseudonym (A1-3 or B1-9). No video recordings will be taken so as to further maintain confidentiality. All collected data will be de-identified, with only yourself and the researcher aware of your individual answers. This de-identified data will then be uploaded to an online AI transcription application named Cockatoo. You will have the option to edit your own transcripts; should you choose to do so, only you will receive your transcript, which must be returned to the researcher within 14 days of issue. You have up to 21 days after the interview to withdraw from this study at which time your transcript and all information about you will be deleted and excluded.

All anonymous interview data will be securely stored in a password-protected folder that will be destroyed by the researcher after seven years in accordance with University regulations. A summary of the research findings will be supplied upon completion of the research if you indicate you would like to receive this.

Participant's Rights
You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:
- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study without explanation up to 21 days following your interview;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Project Contacts
If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate in contacting the research team in the first instance.

Researcher:
Andrina Butler
[redacted]

Supervisors:
Professor Stuart Carr
[redacted]

Doctor Veronica Hopner
[redacted]

Committee Approval Statement
This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 24/15. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, email humanethics3@massey.ac.nz.

TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA | MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Investigating Social Worker Retention and Sustainability Within Rural Areas in Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as Appendix I. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study within 21 days of my interview being recorded.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview audio being recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA | MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Investigating Social Worker Retention and Sustainability Within Rural Areas in Aotearoa New Zealand's South Island

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Full Name - printed .....

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

1. What is your age bracket?

   20-25 25-29 30-39 40+

2. What is your ethnicity?
3. Are you from this area?
4. How many years have you spent in the social work sector?

[Question 5 is probing for individual personality characteristics]

5. Can you describe yourself to me? Your personality, interests etc. What do you like about your role that relates back to your personal description?

[Questions 6-7 are probing for "job characteristics theory"]

6. Briefly discuss the generic social work description below. Can you elaborate on what this entails in your current role?

   "Social workers provide care, advice and support to people with personal or social problems and help with community and social issues." – Careers NZ

7. Do you feel satisfied in your role? Can you elaborate?

   For example, in my work I can pick up extra pieces like Mahi Tahi which helps my satisfaction and motivation within my role.

[Questions 8-10 are probing for "job demands and resources theory", "job characteristics theory" and "job embeddedness theory"]

8. Can you describe your work environment to me, including values and how these are practiced?

9. What does supervision look like to you in your workplace? Broadly, what do you speak about in your sessions?

10. What have your energy levels been like in this role? Can you elaborate?

[Questions 11-13 are probing for “push pull theory” and “unfolding theory of turnover”]

11. In the workforce, a push factor is what makes you consider leaving your role, whereas a pull factor is something pulling you to stay. Can you elaborate on what these are for you in your role, and if one type may outweigh the other?

12. Has there ever been a time or times in your current role where you have considered leaving, and why?

13. *(Group A)* How much support do you feel you get from your board and wider organisation?
    (Group B) How much support do you feel you get from management?

[Questions 14-16 are probing for “job embeddedness theory”]

14. What brought you to your rural community?

15. What does a normal week look like for you, outside of work? Routines, hobbies etc. Does your work sometimes mean you ever have to change these?

16. Overall, do you feel happy within your local community? Does it make you want to stay with your organisation? Why/why not?

17. Please read and complete the Authority for Release of Transcripts form.