Why do stayers stay? Perceptions of Black and White long-term employees in a community mental health center

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This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Bass, E., Salyers, M.P., Hall, A., Garabrant, J., Morse, G., Kyere, E., Dell, N., Greenfield, J., Fukui, S. (2024). Why do stayers stay? Perceptions of Black and White long-term employees in a community mental health center. Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-024-01387-x

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Acknowledgements and Disclosures: The study was supported by National Institute of Mental Health R34 and Diversity Supplement Training (NIMH R34MH119411). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not represent the official views of NIH. Further, the material in this paper was first presented at the 2022 NIMH Mental Health Services Research Conference, August 2-3, 2022.

Abstract

Previous research has focused on factors influencing turnover of employees in the mental health workforce, yet little research has explored reasons why employees stay. To facilitate retaining a diverse mental health workforce, the current study aimed to elucidate factors that contributed to employees' tenure at a community mental health center (CHMC) as well as compare these perceptions between Black and White employees. Long-term employees (7 years or more) from one urban CMHC (n = 22) completed semi-structured stayer interviews. Using emergent thematic analysis, stayer interviews revealed four major themes for why they have stayed at the organization for 7 years or more: (1) work as a calling, (2) supportive relationships, (3) opportunities for growth or meaningful contribution, and (4) organization mission's alignment with personal attributes or values. Comparison between Black and White stayer narratives revealed differences in their perceptions with work as a calling and opportunities for growth and meaningful contribution. Guided by themes derived from stayer interviews, the current study discusses theoretical (e.g., job embeddedness theory, theory of racialized organizations, self-determination theory) and practical implications (e.g., supporting job autonomy, Black voices in leadership) in an effort to improve employee retention and address structural racism within a mental health organization.

Keywords: stay interviews, community mental health, employee retention, mental health workforce, racial differences

Why do stayers stay? Perceptions of White and Black long-term employees in a community mental health center

Retention of high-quality and diverse employees has long been a concern for the mental health workforce, and it is becoming increasingly urgent given recent reports on shortages within the behavioral health workforce (National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, 2023). Turnover is costly – financially and psychologically – to organizations, providers, and the people they serve. Previous research has focused on understanding why mental health workers leave; however, less is known about why mental health workers stay. Understanding factors that facilitate long-term retention is critical for building and maintaining a productive workforce.

Turnover, defined as voluntary or involuntary departure from an organization (Brabson et al., 2020), is a long-standing problem in community mental health centers (CMHCs) with rates between 25% to 60% annually (Beidas et al., 2016; Bukach et al., 2017; Mor Barak et al., 2001). Moreover, recent data from the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey showed the healthcare and social assistance workforce reached an all-time high for voluntary termination in 2020 concurrent with the pandemic (estimated 4.9 million quits; Akinyooye & Nezamis, 2021). Some turnover may be considered "good turnover, such as when new staff bring new energy or ideas, (Wynen et al., 2019) or younger employees leave jobs to advance towards life goals (Wine et al., 2020). However, high turnover is costly for organizations. For example, turnover increases financial costs for mental health organizations including advertising for new job openings, providing additional orientation and training for new staff, and paying overtime for employees covering vacant shifts (Selden, 2010). The financial costs are of particular concern given the lack of funding for mental health care services within the United States (Stewart et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2021). Additionally, turnover is emotionally costly for coworkers, often increasing stress,

such as when remaining employees face higher workloads (Knight et al., 2012), and may negatively impact the continuity of care for clients with severe mental illness (Bond et al., 1991; Brabson et al., 2020; Macdonald et al., 2019; Woltmann et al., 2008).

Given that high turnover has the potential to negatively impact multiple aspects of community mental health care, identifying factors that could reduce turnover among mental health care workers is essential. Nearly 100 years of research on turnover has resulted in multiple theoretical models and predictive factors for why individuals may leave an organization (Hom et al., 2017). However, one relatively new concept in the timespan of turnover research is understanding why employees choose to *stay* at an organization ("stayers;" Hom et al., 2017). Mitchell et al. (2001) first introduced this idea through the job embeddedness theory by conceptualizing a network of factors that may prevent an employee from leaving an organization: 1) *links*: connections made between coworkers, non-work friends, institutions, and the larger community, 2) *fit*: the employee's perceived compatibility with the company and community, and 3) *sacrifices*: the perceived cost of leaving the company. Although job embeddedness theory explains factors that may influence employee retention, most research on job embeddedness theory measures voluntary employee turnover or intentions to leave and factors related to job performance, rather than actual retention (Lee et al., 2014). However, job embeddedness theory argues that motives for staying at an organization may differ from motives for leaving; through studying why people stay, researchers should be able to explain additional variance in turnover (Hom et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2001). Similarly, in developing retention strategy plans for organizations, Steel and colleagues (2002) recommend completing stayer interviews with employees—asking them why they choose to stay at an organization to gather information that may differ from why they may consider leaving. Therefore, understanding

specific reasons for why employees stay at CMHCs for long periods of time may elucidate protective factors against turnover above and beyond the common motives for leaving.

Despite theoretical reasons to study retention, this research is much less common than research on turnover within the general workforce and is almost nonexistent in the mental health field. Research within corporate organizations (George, 2015) and physical health services (including British allied health professionals, Loan-Clarke et al., 2010; home health services, Butler et al., 2014) suggests a wide array of factors that may contribute to long-term employee retention such as having opportunities for promotion or professional growth (George, 2015; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010), positive work-life balance (George, 2015; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010), fair compensation (Butler et al., 2014; George, 2015; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010), autonomy and flexibility (Butler et al., 2014; George, 2015; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010), job satisfaction/an enjoyable work atmosphere (George, 2015; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010), support from coworkers and leadership (George, 2015), and job security (Loan-Clarke et al., 2010). In line with job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), Loan-Clarke et al. (2010) also found that reasons identified for staying were not simply the converse of reasons for leaving. For example, job security was identified as the top reason for employees to stay at their organization while "lack of job security" was not a main reason for leaving (Loan-Clarke et al., 2010).

Within the mental health field, research on understanding why stayers remain at CMHCs is extremely sparse despite extensive research on mental health worker turnover (Beidas et al., 2016; Brabson et al., 2020; Bukach et al., 2017; Fukui et al., 2019; Fukui et al., 2020; Hallett et al., 2023). Indeed, to the authors' knowledge, there is only one study in the mental health field that is closely related to this topic. Using links, sacrifices, and fit from job embeddedness theory as a priori codes, Burns, Christie, and O'Sullivan (2020) found that having a strong career

preference for social work, seeing positive change with clients, job autonomy, support of peers, and feeling adequately challenged explained why "stayers" (defined as staying for 10+ years) stayed in social work for child protection and welfare services in Ireland (Burns et al., 2020). However, this study was limited by using an a priori coding framework and examining one particular type of mental health worker. Additional research may reveal important new factors that are not included in job embeddedness theory.

In addition, given the increased attention to the importance of retaining a diverse workforce, understanding possible racial differences in why people stay at organizations may be important. In particular, organizations may play a part in structural racism—the interaction between different institutions and subsystems on multiple levels of society that serve to maintain racial and ethnic inequality (Dean & Thorpe, 2022). Structural racism within organizations may differentially affect workers' perceptions in retention across different racial groups. For example, the theory of racialized organizations, suggests that organizations are byproducts of a larger racialized system (Ray, 2019). From this perspective, organizations may proclaim to be race-neutral, yet their policies enforce certain societal rules and agreements that favor the allocation of organizational resources to Whites over Persons of Color, which serves to maintain racial hierarchies within the organization where whiteness is considered superior (Ray, 2019). For example, Kyere and Fukui (2022) discuss how mental health organizations may increase efforts to recruit a diverse workforce, yet due to subsystems of structural racism (such as racial disparities within education systems) employees of color are disproportionately concentrated to frontline positions that are limited in organizational support and opportunities. This may ultimately increase racial disparities in employee turnover and retention and serve to maintain a white worldview within the organization. Indeed, one study investigating racial disparities

among the mental health workforce found that Black employees reported less supportive social networks and lower levels of organizational support (Pullen et al., 2023), which are factors associated with job embeddedness (e.g., links and fit within an organization; Mitchell et al., 2001). Despite the possibility of racial inequality within mental health care organizations, research has not yet examined racial differences in why employees choose to stay at organizations for long periods of time. Doing so may explain additional factors that contribute to employee retention that are specific to the perceptions of employees of color while also highlighting how data from stayer interviews may be analyzed using a race conscious framework (Kyere & Fukui, 2023) to understand retention of a racially diverse workforce within mental health organizations.

To date, researchers have yet to look across employees of a CMHC to understand reasons for why long-term employees have stayed at these organizations. Given the limited research in this area, the current study aims to identify emergent themes from interviews with long-term employees across a broad range of professions at a Midwestern CMHC. We were interested in factors that contributed to 1) why employees stayed in general and 2) why they stayed in times when they considered leaving. Additionally, in recognizing the importance of analyzing organizational data using a race conscious framework, we completed a secondary analysis comparing emergent themes between Black and White employees to identify commonalities and potential differences in reasons for staying. This research could elucidate unique protective factors against turnover for mental health workers above and beyond reasons for leaving and yield possible points for CMHCs to intervene to retain a diverse workforce for longer periods.

Methods

Study Overview

As part of a larger study to understand turnover in community mental health (the grant number), we identified and interviewed employees with substantial longevity (within a given organization) to understand their perceptions of factors that contributed to their long tenure. We completed individual, semi-structured interviews and used emergent, consensus-based qualitative analysis to identify core themes related to staying at the organization. Additionally, we applied a race conscious framework (Kyere & Fukui, 2023) to explore commonalities and differences between White and Black stayers. All procedures were approved through the university's institutional review board and performed in accordance with the ethical standards set forth in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Setting and Participants

The CMHC was in an urban area and provided a variety of mental health services for adults and children, including case management, assertive community treatment, home-based and school-based services, supported employment, medication management, integrated treatment for co-occurring disorders, and individual and group therapy. Based on available records maintained by the human resources department at the beginning of this project, we identified "stayers" as employees who had achieved a tenure of approximately three times the average length of tenure for the organization (average tenure = 6 years, criteria for stayers = 18 years); There were 19 possible participants who had been at the organization for at least 18 years; however, with a goal of N=15 and assuming a 50% participation rate, we decreased the criterion to 14 years to secure an additional 8 possible participants.

As of June 1, 2020 (the start of this portion of the study), 27 stayers were identified (i.e., 8% of the current employees); however, four were excluded (two were part of the research team, one was on medical leave, and another resigned just after the list was created). The research team

emailed the 23 eligible employees to invite them to participate in an interview, and 13 (56.5%) agreed. The rest of the eligible employees (N=10) either did not respond to the email invitation (n=8; 3 email attempts) or declined (n=2; no interest; no specific reason identified).

However, we found that, of the 13 recruited participants, 85% were white. Specifically, 11 out of 13 participants were white and 2 participants were black despite the organization consisting of 44% Black (vs. 55% White) employees at the time. In order to recruit more representative samples, we increased purposive sampling to interview Black employees who had stayed at the organization for a long time after the completion of the initial stayer analysis. We originally aimed at recruiting those who had been employed at the organization for at least 10 years as we could recruit only 2 Black participants with the initial 14-year criterion. However, we had to lower the criterion further to 7 years to secure the current sample size and to better reflect the organization's racial composition. As of March 22, 2021 (the start of recruitment with the new criterion), 40 Black stayers were identified and invited via email to participate. Nine (22%) stayers agreed to participate and the rest of the eligible Black employees (N=31) either did not respond to the email invitation (n=28; 3 email attempts and 1 phone call if applicable), declined (n=2; no interest; no specific reason identified), or left the agency (n =1).

Please insert Table 1 around here

Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted by either a clinical psychologist (author initials), a professor of social work (author initials), or a doctoral student in clinical psychology (author initials) using Zoom between July 15, 2020 and July 20, 2022. Participants were emailed an informed consent statement prior to the interview. At the start of interview, we reviewed the informed consent with participants, allowing time for questions, and all participants provided verbal consent.

Interviewers followed a guide (available upon request) which began with a "grand tour" question (Spradley, 2016) to establish rapport and provide entrée to the participants' experiences at the organization (e.g., Tell me about your role and what you do). We then asked focused, open-ended questions to assess participants' perceptions about why they believe they have stayed at the organization so long. We also asked if there were ever times when they considered leaving and asked them to describe those times and what helped them stay. Finally, we asked why they thought others have stayed or left the organization and if there were additional thoughts that might help us understand why people might stay for a long time. All interviews were recorded and saved to a secure server in a limited access folder behind the university firewall, transcribed, and deidentified. Interviewers also took notes and created summary memos following each interview to document key findings. Interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes (actual time ranged from 18 to 91 minutes), and participants were reimbursed for their time with a $25 electronic gift card.

Data Analyses

We followed an emergent content analytic approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with elements of immersion and crystallization (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Initially, two authors (author initials) independently reviewed the summary memos for the first round of recruitment (i.e., stayers who had at least 14 years at the organization; n = 13) and created a list of reasons why participants stayed. We then met to discuss the two lists and merge them into one set of provisional codes. At this point in the analyses, we brought in a third team member (author initials) and independently applied the initial set of codes to two transcripts. We then met to discuss any discrepancies in coding and to refine the coding process. Once we developed a set of stable codes (See Table 2), we divided the transcripts into sets of three transcripts and

systematically applied the codes to each transcript, including transcripts from the second round of recruitment. We focused specifically on responses in the interview that pertained to why stayers chose to stay in general and responses to the question: *"Were there ever times when you considered leaving [organization name]? Can you tell me more about those times?"* To maintain consensus among coders, we coded one transcript together for each set of transcripts. Discrepancies in codes were discussed until the coders reached a consensus. After coding was complete, we reviewed the contents under each code, referring back to the transcripts to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the coding.

Following coding of the first round of transcripts, we identified patterns in codes (e.g., codes occurring together, frequently occurring codes) to create core factors that emerged from the transcripts in understanding why people stayed at this organization and what led them to stay in times when they considered leaving. After identifying core factors, we applied our set of stable codes to the stayer interviews from the second round of recruitment with Black stayers that had at least 7 years of experience at the organization. Codes were stable across this second round of interviews and no additional changes were made to the codebook. Additionally, core factors identified from the first round of coded interviews also fit across the second round of interviews, and no additional changes were made to these factors. Throughout the process, we confirmed thematic saturation such that our themes were fully represented in the data and observing new data did not produce new themes related to the research question (Hennink et al., 2017). Lastly, we compared White and Black stayer responses at the core factor level to identify any differences and/or commonalities in why they stayed both in general and in times when they considered leaving using a race conscious framework.

Below, we describe the core factors that emerged from the transcripts in understanding why people stayed at this organization in general and what led them to stay in times when they considered leaving. Additionally, we describe differences found within these core factors between Black and White stayers.

Please insert Table 2 around here

Authors' Reflexivity Statement

During the initial data collection and analysis, the research team strived to be as neutral as possible when considering reasons stayers chose to stay at their organization. However, we realized that we also might bring with us prior assumptions and beliefs that might have impacted the lens through which we interpreted the data. Our initial team included two White women of Western European descent and a Japanese man. We initially did not consider the potential for racial differences because we were not aware of specific discussions related to racial differences in stay interview studies. However, upon participant recruitment, we became aware that our inclusion criteria (i.e., the length of tenure) were likely to exclude Black employees. While we initially believed our recruitment process was neutral, we considered the possible race-based exclusion as potential structural racism. Accordingly, we sought a collaborator with expertise in race conscious frameworks, a Black man born in Africa, who provided additional help in conducting interviews and analyzing the data.

Results

We organized findings around core factors of why stayers stay. Reasons identified for staying in times when they considered leaving were not fundamentally different from the reasons identified for staying in general. However, analysis of the interviews from this perspective led to a deeper understanding of which reasons may serve as protective factors through difficult times

in stayers' tenure (i.e., supportive relationships and opportunities for growth or meaningful contribution). Further, although reasons for staying are presented as distinct categories, activities from different categories often occurred simultaneously to explain stayers' long tenure at the organization. Lastly, differences were noted between Black and White stayers in two core factors for staying, including "work as a calling" and "opportunities for growth or meaningful contribution", while no racial differences were found within the "supportive relationships," "personal attributes," or "comparisons" core factors.

Why Stayers Stay

Codes listed in Table 2 were organized into four broader, core factors explaining why stayers stay: (1) work as a calling, (2) supportive work relationships, (3) opportunities for growth and meaningful contribution, and (4) personal attributes or values. A fifth core factor arose when stayers described times they considered leaving in which they made comparisons to other agencies. Some codes may fall under more than one broader core factor due to different subthemes within one code. Below are descriptions of findings by each core factor.

Work As a Calling

One reoccurring theme across interviews was stayers' descriptions of their work as a calling both as a means of self-fulfillment and connecting to a broader passion for helping others. Many described work as bringing them a larger sense of purpose or meaning, and close alignment with the organization's overall mission as an influential factor for why they have stayed:

> I stayed, I think primarily because all in all, I really am passionate about the vision and the mission of the agency, the people that we serve, the services that we provide I think are so very important, and I think by and large, our agency does it best. (S210)

Additionally, the mission of the organization—a client-centered approach, helping individuals with severe mental illness live productive and meaningful live—was interwoven throughout descriptions of their commitment to their job, their relationships with their colleagues, opportunities for meaningful change, and their own personal attributes or values. Thus, this code often spanned broad factors. In addition to believing in the overall mission of the organization, many stayers expressed commitment to, and even adoration for, the population served: "I don't leave because I really love this population. I really, really do." (S201)

Further, stayers often mentioned factors related to having passion for their job. Many discussed the rewarding experience of being able to help their clients in recovery.

> I saw people's lives changing. And people were growing, the people I was working with were growing. Several people that I've work with actually found recovery in their life, and they actually graduated from our program… I saw what I was doing. You know, when I was doing my best work. So, why would you leave in the midst of that, you know? (S219)

Others mentioned that they are passionate about the research behind the work that they do. For example, one stayer discussed their passion for understanding the mechanisms behind treatment through studying evidence-based care: "really making the knowledge and care go together"; S204).

Differences Between White and Black Stayers

One noted difference within "Work as a Calling" between Black and White stayers was how the stayers identified with the population served. Several Black stayers mentioned not only valuing the work that they do, but also feeling that they were giving back to their own

communities. For example, one Black stayer mentioned having the opportunity to connect people to resources that were not available to people in their community growing up:

> Well, I have a passion for helping people and then [organization name], I would say, is like 80 to 70% black people [clients]… So, it's like growing up, we didn't see these things as substance abuse or mental health [problems]. It's like, things were not offered to us or our parents didn't have the resources to get the help. So, a lot things were done within the family, you know…working, stepping into this company, it was like unbelievable. That my job is to go and make sure someone has food to eat, make sure that they're house is clean, make sure they're taking their medication, make sure they're getting to their doctor's appointment, I'm like, "Wow. Really". And that's one reason I stayed. (S214)

Additionally, one Black stayer described learning more about their own community through their job at the organization that helped them stay:

> [W]hen I would see somebody that I recognized from the community that may have back in the day acted weird to me, I couldn't put, I couldn't identify that thing until I was educated to understand how to identify a trauma or substance abuse, you know…..it just gave me a bigger range of understanding that I did not have. (S215)

Lastly, one Black stayer mentioned that being black allowed them to better communicate with the population served: "Cause most of the people that we, not all, but most of the people that we serve are African American. So, there is instant identification and ease in communication" (S218). On the other hand, while White stayers also discussed their passion and adoration for the population served (e.g., "just generally speaking, all the clientele are wonderful in their own ways..." [S202]), they did not necessarily relate this back to their own communities or identities.

Supportive Relationships

Many stayers discussed having supportive relationships (with supervisors, leadership, and with team members) as a factor that contributed to why they stay. Specifically, multiple stayers discussed the comradery, closeness, or "family-like" bond they felt with some of their supervisors and/or their team. For example, one stayer stated:

> I could just name off all my supervisors from day one, and I, to this day, I count them all as friends. Just valued comrades, you know, along the road that we all took. So, I would say it's kind of the backbone I guess of why I like working there, is that I always feel that I have people that I could work with staff-wise. (S202)

Further, some stayers also discussed the ability to approach and create relationships with leadership as a reason for staying:

> I can think of one right off the top of my head, and that's the higher ups. They are so hands on with everybody, just treat everybody the same, as far as I've seen. I haven't seen nothing or heard of any negativity as far as, and I feel like when the higher ups, the head of the company is down to earth, and you know, had the open-door policies where you can just go and if you need to talk to them, they always got time, you know, stuff like that. (S223)

Additionally, some stayers discussed the support they received from their coworkers or supervisors as crucial for staying in general and especially during times they considered leaving. For example, some stayers spoke of feeling support from coworkers during difficulties in their personal life:

> I had a sick mother and a grandmother that were both ill. So, it was like family and work were a bit much. And so, I thought about [leaving] and then I thought, you know, these

> folks gave me the flexibility to take care of my family. They told me they came first. And so, I stopped thinking about leaving cause I knew no one else was going to give me that opportunity. So, I stayed. While the pay is not that great, they make up for it with other things. (S222)

Another stayer described a time when they had problems with their supervisor that led them to consider leaving. During this time, they spoke with the human resources department and felt "heard" and supported based on those conversations: *"*I came away from conversations realizing that they understood what I was dealing with. That I wasn't just kind of making things up or being kind of melodramatic*"* (S210). Lastly, one stayer discussed their commitment to their coworkers as a reason for staying in times they felt direspected by leadership:

> I feel a responsibility and a duty to not, definitely to the person served always, but also, to the people that I have been lucky enough to work with and work with me. And so, that's often why I stayed. Even if I felt disrespected. (S203)

One positive consequence of supportive relationships was stayers feeling like their voices were heard and valued. For example, one stayer discussed a situation where their supervisor wanted to make changes to their position that the stayer was hesitant about. The stayer ultimately came to the decision to make the change, but did not feel pushed in making that decision. They stated, *"*And at the time I wasn't pushed into doing that. So, that made me feel like, 'Okay. I'm valued.' And I've always felt valued. I've always felt that I'm being heard and my voice is important*"* (S210).

Another aspect of the supportive relationships was a sense of trust. Many stayers discussed the trust supervisors or leadership had in the stayer's ability to get the job done. For example, one stayer remarked: *"*And you know, people trust you to be competent; and if you're

not, then you get competent*"* (S209). This ability to do their job independently often mapped on to flexibility and job autonomy. Multiple stayers reflected positively on the autonomy their supervisors granted. However, a couple of stayers mentioned that although they enjoy not being micro-managed, not everyone enjoys a "hands off" supervisor:

> Cause there is a lot of freedom and space to move. I like my space, and I get a lot of space. So, that's a perk. And while I don't necessarily get the mentoring that I would like to get, I also don't have a micro manger. And I appreciate that. You trust me to do my job because I do my job thoroughly. (S221)

Thus, the fit between supervisor and supervisee may be more important in employee retention than simply not being "micro-managed."

Additionally, some stayers described how other team members' passion for the organization's mission also inspired them to keep going. For example, one stayer described that seeing other social workers' commitment to the persons served (in terms of time and quality) humbled and encouraged them. Another stayer described the inspiration they drew from one particular mentor (described as "one of [their] heroes in life") and how this mentor's long tenure (over thirty years) contributed to their career longevity as well.

Inspiration from other colleagues' dedication to the mission also contributed to stayers' tenure in times when they considered leaving. For example, one stayer discussed how employees with longer tenures at the organization "took [them] under their wing" and reminded them that even when they felt "underpaid and underappreciated" that "there's a reason why we do [this job] and there's a reason why it matters*"* (S212). Indeed, the ability to relate to coworkers was highlighted by stayers as an important factor in why they staying:

> They usually find a like-minded co-worker or someone they can be close to. Like they find their path within the organization. And they stick close to them. And that's usually how people stay at an organization. Like if you can't find someone to relate to at an organization, you're not going to stay. And I found that, that happened with a few people. (S221)

Opportunities for Growth or Meaningful Contribution

Throughout the interviews, many stayers discussed opportunities that have been meaningful to them and have helped them stay at the organization. Firstly, stayers discussed having the opportunity to pursue what interests them. Oftentimes, this was mentioned when discussing flexibility and autonomy as well as opportunities to learn and grow when pursuing something new or different. For example:

> I don't think I would have been able to stay so long if I hadn't been able to move around. So, there was a lot of benefit in being able to change positions because I like to learn and grow and that sort of thing. So, the flexibility and the ability to move laterally, and horizontally, and vertically, I guess. (S208)

Many stayers discussed being offered a new position within the organization during a critical juncture. For example, one stayer discussed how they actually left the organization for a new job opportunity but returned after being unhappy with their new job. During this time, the stayer contacted the organization and was offered a new opportunity and has stayed ever since. Another stayer discussed a time when they were recruited by another organization, but stayed due to HR's response that ultimately made them feel valued by the organization:

> But [organization name] said to me that I was valuable to them. And they showed me my value. And showed me that they appreciated my loyalty to the agency. And they exceeded what that other agency was offering me financially. (S218)

Additionally, stayers discussed valuing opportunities to be creative or innovative within the organization. Sometimes this was discussed in the context of a supervisor allowing the stayer to have job autonomy (as discussed above in "Supportive Relationships"). Other times, stayers spoke more generally about being "granted" the autonomy to be innovative or creative without mentioning who specifically allowed them to do this: "I like the creative control that I have over my team. So, I pretty much can implement procedures and processes within my little team. And that works for me." (S221)

Lastly, stayers discussed how the opportunity for personal growth helped them stay. For example, one stayer described how their relationship with clients has also served as an opportunity for them to personally grow: "You know, as much as I think I'm helping other people, you know, I get more out of it sometimes" (S207). Another stayer described how a personal opportunity for growth helped them improve at their job as a supervisor, which contributed to why they stayed even during a difficult time at the organization: "I also had gone to some leadership academies and done some different things. And right now I feel like I'm, of course, not perfect cause you can only go down from there, but I'm a very strong leader, well liked, very well respected." (S203)

Difference Between White and Black Stayers

One difference noted between White and Black stayers within the "Opportunities for Growth or Meaningful Contribution" factor was the lack of discussion surrounding having a voice or opportunity to make organizational changes. Specifically, White stayers described how

a combination of flexibility in their position and the opportunity to make meaningful change within the organization helped them stay: “But I feel like I really got to develop a lot..... It’s like I haven’t done the same job for twenty minutes, man. (laughter) You know, it’s like, it was always moving, and I guess I was attracted to that.” (S209). Additionally, White stayers reported that the opportunity to have a voice in organization development also made them feel valued by the organization:

> And then also being a part of all that as we evolved, and having a voice, and everything that we did, and all the changes that we made, and all the new grants that we were going to try to go for, the implementation of all of that. And so, having a voice at the table, especially early in my career, was really important to me. (S203)

On the other hand, the perspective of having a voice or opportunity to make organizational changes seemed to be rather limited among the Black stayers. Some Black stayers also did mention having a voice within their direct team as a reason for staying: “We had meetings every day to go over the caseloads and what is going on. And as long as you come to the table with a solution, it’s okay. You have a voice” (S214). However, there was only one Black stayer who discussed involvement in making broader organizational change as a reason for staying. Additionally, this stayer mentioned often being one of few employees of color that has the time to dedicate to joining these initiatives:

> I like that there are different committees that I can join at the agency. And I have hope that when I’m on these committees, initiatives can develop and it betters the agency…. there are people of color there. I know what it is, they’re not in leadership. They’re not all in leadership, and so, they don’t have the time. A lot of them are direct care staff. So, they’re out in the field. They don’t have time to join 50 committees. (S221)

Personal Attributes or Values

Upon further analysis of quotes associated with the "other" code, a new theme emerged—personal factors. Specifically, multiple stayers mentioned factors they see as personal attributes or traits that have perhaps led them to stay longer than other people at the organization. Interestingly, many of these "personal traits" surrounded either the idea of persevering and not being a "quitter" when facing obstacles or being laid back and being able to handle obstacles "in stride." For example, one stayer reported:

> Well, I don't know if this is an exclusive difference, but I've always been kind of a laid-back, low-key, not high-strung kind of person. Who, you know, I don't get particularly riled if things aren't going just the way I thought, or you know, hit some bumps in the road. (S207)

Additionally, some stayers highlighted the importance of having the ability to recognize small progress made by clients:

> And so, I'm kind of in the middle there because I thrive on seeing progress. But at the same time, I can also appreciate the investment in terms of, you know, time and effort in just moving somebody just a tiny little bit from where they were, you know, in a positive way. (S202)

Further, multiple stayers discussed their preference for routine and dislike for change as a personal factor that helped them stay at the organization:

> I don't like change that much. Just to be honest. (laughter) I really am one of those people that, you know, probably would've had the nine-to-five work-at-the-bank kind of guy or maybe do farming or something, you know, where you knew what the heck you were doing. That's part of it. (S205)

Another stayer believed that it was a personal decision to align their professional goals to be compatible with their personal life in a way that allows them to stay at their job:

> I think it's really a personal thing, you know.…what is your dedication to yourself to make sure your employment is working. That's what I would say, you know, it's really on an individual. What's your goal for you? Does your goal for you align with the goal that [organization name] has, you know? And so, for me, I was able to align my goals up that I had for myself, you know, and the things that I had going on for myself. And I was able to stage and stack my dominos in a way that it all worked. And each individual has to make up their mind. How are they going to make the employment here interact and enhance their personal life? (S215)

Lastly, a few stayers discussed their beliefs around job longevity as contributing factors to why they stayed at the organization. Specifically, they spoke about the strong value that older generations placed on staying in one position for a long time compared to new trends of switching positions more frequently to gain experience. For example, one stayer reported:

> So, when I was coming up, they always said that longevity on a job was supposed to be good. But now it's almost like a detriment because it seems like you don't want to advance your life or do anything else, so. And I just kind of always have just kept a job a long time. (S213)

Comparison to Other Organizations

Stayers often made comparisons to other organizations when discussing reasons for staying during times when they considered leaving. Stayers discussed looking for new jobs yet not finding anything that was of the same quality as their current organization position (e.g., "The grass is not really greener on the other side."; S208). For example, one stayer discussed

being offered new opportunies at different agencies but ultimately deciding to stay because nothing “measured up”:

> Anytime I did that and then when opportunities would arise, maybe it was a couple bucks more, maybe not, or maybe it was a little bit easier or cushier. It was still, you compare your environment, you compare your organization, you compare what’s important to you, and that always led me to decide to just be here and say no to other things. And you know, sure, it feels good. You like to have options. But at the same time, it never measured up. And again, it wasn’t just the pay. And that’s, you know, in this business sometimes that’s, you know, it’s important. (S209)

Additionally, some stayers mentioned a reason for staying as having a lack of better opportunities elsewhere. For example, one stayer discussed how their current problems with the organization were also present at other similar organizations:

> Working more with external partners made me realize that like, oh, well, but they have their communication issues too. Like it’s actually not going to be different if I go somewhere else. ….so, there wasn’t anything that made me think, oh, I really want to leave. (S208)

Other stayers discussed that during times they considered leaving, they did not see moving agencies as a possible solution or moving agencies may actually make things worse.

> I mean bottom line it’s, you know, stable jobs aren’t really that easy to come by for, you know... So, like most people can’t really afford to just leave a job because they have a bad manager, you know…(S216)

> I guess there’s some of it might be feeling like there’s lack of better opportunities…. but what I’d have to do at that other agency I think would be worse. (S212)

Further, some stayers discussed specific qualities of their current job that they may have to sacrifice if switching to a new organization. For example, one stayer spoke of the flexibility built into their job that helps them manage their responsibilites as a single parent, which may not be present at other jobs:

> You know, I've thought about going to the hospital and working, but you can't do that there, you know. You can't have the flexibility I have. It's not how that works. And my agency does a good job of listening to people's needs and working with them around flexibility. (S211)

Lastly, another stayer spoke about how the organization matched their personal "values system" the best compared to other agencies in the area: *"*I start looking for jobs or something and then it's like it's really, it feels nearly impossible to find someplace that matches my value system the same way*"* (S212). Similar to above, this stayer also spoke about the flexibility their job allows to manage childcare compared to other agencies, and that they have even turned down other opportunities because they value spending time with their children more:

> Maybe there's been things I've traded off with promotions along the way, or things like that. But being a part of my kids' lives is having the joy of doing those things is fantastic and that's what I want to do. (S212)

Discussion

Understanding factors that may retain mental health workers is imperative given high rates of turnover and its impact of employees' wellbeing as well as associated cost to the organization. Research indicates that reasons why employees stay at an organization may not simply be the converse of reasons for leaving (Hom et al., 2017; Loan-Clarke et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2001; Steel et al., 2002), yet research identifying reasons why mental health

workers stay at their organization is scarce. As such, the current study sought to qualitatively analyze narratives from long-term employees at a CHMC to identify stayers' reasons for staying. However, participant recruitment for the study revealed differences between White and Black employees' tenures at the organization. Specifically, Black employees were not eligible for the initial stayer interview given their shorter tenures on average at the organization. Accordingly, the research team lowered the eligibility criteria. Research indicates that structural racism present in our society may serve to maintain racial hierarchies within mental health organizations. This could directly impact retention of a diverse mental health workforce and reinforces the importance analyzing organizational data, such as stayer interviews, using a race conscious framework (Kyere & Fukui, 2022). Given racial differences in tenure identified early in study recruitment and research indicating the possibility for racial differences in employee retention, the current study completed a secondary analysis comparing White and Black stayer narratives to better understand factors that may improve retention efforts in the diverse mental health workforce.

Work as a Calling: Passion, Population, and Mission

Results indicated that an important theme throughout stayer narratives was the passion they maintained for their work, the population they serve, and the overall mission of the organization. We labeled this described passion as a "calling" in qualitative analysis due to previous literature describing a work calling to be when an individual ties a sense of purpose to their work, focuses on how their work contributes to the greater good, and/or identifies a force that guides them to their particular field (Duffy et al., 2018). Work callings have been associated with positive job outcomes such as job satisfaction or performance. However, they have also

shown to be associated with negative outcomes such as burnout or overworking (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2018).

Despite research indicating possible negative consequences of callings, many stayers in the current study described their passion for their work as a protective factor when facing difficult situations (e.g., "there's a reason why we do [this job] and there's a reason why it matters" [S212]). Although there may be many explanations for why stayers perceive their passion for the work as an almost exclusively positive experience, one factor in our sample may be related to their personal traits. Research indicates that certain traits such as perfectionism may increase people's susceptibility to experiencing negative consequences of callings (Duffy et al., 2018). Interestingly, many of the stayers in the current study described personality traits that were the opposite of "perfectionism" (e.g., being "laid back") as something that helped them thrive in their job, particularly during conflict at work. However, it is important to consider context when examining stayers' perceptions of personality traits—other employees in the organization may not view being "laid back" as a strength within the context of their job demands.

Additionally, stayers discussed the overall mission of the organization as being deeply entwined with their passion for their work. Research on mission attachment indicates that non-profit organizations tend to use their mission as a tool to motivate employees and highlight the overall goal of the organization (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003). However, Brown and Yoshioka (2003) found that although mission helps attract employees to the organization, it is less effective in retaining employees. Specifically, low pay tended to override mission attachment when employees discussed their turnover intentions (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003). It is possible that this particular CMHC attracted stayers due to a unique mission compared to other agencies in the

area. Indeed, many discussed how the mission was unique to their CHMC compared to other agencies around the area (e.g., "it feels nearly impossible to find someplace that matches my value system the same way" [S212]). Although the uniqueness of the organization may have served to initially attract employees, the interviews suggested that the combination of mission attachment and other factors such as supportive relationships and feeling valued worked together to retain these employees long-term. Future research should examine how a combination of mission attachment with other protective factors (e.g., supportive relationships, opportunities for growth, feeling valued) may mitigate turnover intentions and increase employee retention in the mental health field.

Practical Implications

Considering that many stayers discussed the sense of meaning they derive from their work as a factor that helped them stay (in combination with an alignment with the organization's mission), it may be beneficial for CMHCs to not only emphasize the mission of the organization to employees, but also encourage employees to remember their "why" for working and consider how it aligns with the CMHC mission. For example, in an intervention targeted to reduce burnout among mental health workers, employees are encouraged to reflect and discuss what drew them into the profession and what is most important to them about their work (Salyers et al., 2011; Salyers et al., 2019). It is possible that encouraging employees to consider their "why" for joining the mental health workforce increases their mission attachment, which may increase their intentions to stay at the organization in combination with other protective factors.

Supportive Relationships

In addition to perceiving their work as a calling and attachment to the overall mission of the organization, stayers also discussed their relationships with their colleagues as integral to

why they stayed. Previous research in job embeddedness theory suggests that developing "links" such as connections to coworkers is one way in which employees become embedded in an organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). Links are evident when stayers described feeling the need to stay at the organization for betterment of their team, such as the person who described "a responsibility and a duty*"* (S203) to coworkers. While having supportive relationships at work is not unique to the mental health workforce, the mission of patient-centered care for persons with complex needs (e.g., severe mental illness, housing insecurity) and team-based care may have created an environment in which supportive relationships flourished. For example, many stayers discussed the comradery their work created among teams all working towards a common goal that helped them stay at the organization.

Practical Implications

Creating a sense of community has been a strategy among mental health organizations to protect against burnout, a major contributor to retaining staff in mental health services (Morse et al., 2012). As such, it may be beneficial for employers to consider team bonding exercises or social gatherings to increase personal relationships among staff. For example, researchers within a medical school used an appreciative inquiry exercise to create a positive social environment among students and faculty (Suchman et al., 2004). Specifically, researchers interviewed students and faculty and asked them about successful experiences they have had within their social environment at school. Common themes found from the interviews were then presented back to the organization, which ultimately created a dialogue among faculty and students on how to maintain and grow supportive relationships in the organization that were consistent with the medical school's values (Suchman et al., 2004). Using techniques such as appreciative inquiry within team bonding exercises may provide space for mental healthcare employees to reflect on

how supportive social relationships among team members can be created and maintained within the organization.

Another mechanism for employee retention related to supportive relationships may be through tailoring supervisor support. While many of the stayers enjoyed having a supervisor that was relatively "hands off," they also acknowledged that this may depend on personal preference or an employee's level of experience. Therefore, it may be important to train supervisors to be strategic in response to the supervisee's supervisory needs. For example, supervisors might adopt different patterns of interacting with supervisees based on their needs (Li et al., 2020). In particular, due to the importance of perceived job autonomy, supervisors must carefully balance the supervisory style preference of their employees while also providing autonomy support. Hardré and Reeve (2009) discussed using self-determination theory (SDT) to train corporate managers to adopt a more autonomy-supportive motivating style toward their employees, which later significantly contributed to employees' increased workplace engagement and autonomous motivation. They trained managers in four strategies supported in research with SDT: 1) gaining awareness of employee's interests and tailoring their work tasks to these interests to support intrinsic motivation, 2) adopting noncontrolling language (e.g., less evaluative or pressuring) when communicating workplace requirements, 3) providing rationale behind requests (e.g., stating the value of completing a task that may otherwise be unappealing), and 4) acknowledging and accepting employees' complaints or disagreements as potentially valid reactions to doing a difficult task (Hardré & Reeve, 2009). Training supervisors in the mental health workforce on these principles may further increase supervisors' ability to support employees' autonomy while also adapting their strategies to the employee's needs.

Opportunities for Growth and Meaningful Contribution

Another common theme present in the stayer narratives was the importance of having opportunities for growth or meaningful contribution. SDT posits that individuals have the innate desire for growth and self-motivation and that people are at their best when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many stayers described having autonomy and flexibility as means of achieving opportunities for growth or meaningful contributions. Indeed, in the general workforce, higher job autonomy has been associated with higher career-oriented proactive behavior and stronger career commitment (Wu et al., 2018), higher job satisfaction (Zhang & He, 2022), and greater career self-management (Li et al., 2021). Further, many stayers stated that their consideration for leaving was resolved when the organization offered them new opportunities for growth. It is possible that the sample of long-term stayers represented employees whose concerns had been addressed and resolved by the organization, most often through the offering of new opportunities for growth (e.g., promotion).

In addition to autonomy, the ability to grow and make meaningful change closely aligns with competency in SDT—people are more likely to be internally motivated when they feel they are competent at the task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Previous research found that workers often described times they were at their best at work as when they felt effective and saw success (Salyers et al., 2015). Additionally, Lai (2011) suggests that the degree to which employees are given the opportunity to demonstrate competency may also be important in employee retention (perceived competency mobilization; Lai, 2011). While the feeling of being competent at the job is important, stayer interviews also highlighted the importance of the trust between supervisors and team members that created an environment where competency can be achieved (e.g., “And you know, people trust you to be competent; and if you’re not, then you get competent.” [S209]).

Practical Implications

Related to opportunities for growth, increasing an employee's skills in job crafting may be a viable option to promote growth within their position and has been associated with a variety of positive employee outcomes (e.g., person-job fit, job satisfaction, intentions to stay, work engagement; Zhang & Parker, 2019). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) state that job crafting behaviors include changing job tasks, changing quality or number of relationships at work, or changing their perceptions about their job. Additionally, these behaviors can be promoted through giving employees the autonomy to do their job as they see fit (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001; Sekiguchi et al., 2017). Further, job crafting interventions, such as proactive goal-setting, are available to enhance work engagement and well-being (Van Wingerden et al., 2017; Van Den Heuvel et al., 2015). Job crafting interventions are relatively short with some even consisting of just 1 day of training (Van Den Heuvel et al., 2015). As such, teaching job crafting to employees while also creating an environment that promotes job crafting (via job autonomy) may be important to enhance employee retention.

Personal Attributes and Values

Stayers mentioned unique personal traits and abilities that they believed contributed to their tenure at the organization and possibly differentiated them from individuals that left (e.g., valuing perseverance). While research on individual characteristics influencing employee retention is limited, previous research indicates that certain personality traits such as emotional stability, conscientiousness, and proactiveness may be associated with reduced turnover (Zimmerman, 2008) or increased organizational embeddedness (Singh, 2019). Additionally, proactive personality significantly predicted job crafting such that proactive employees were better able to shape their job to align with their preferences and interests, which has significant

impacts on person-organization fit (Liao, 2022). Because certain personality traits may be associated with positive job outcomes (e.g., reduced turnover, job crafting), future research is needed to understand how to best support existing employees with differing strengths and personality characteristics.

Comparisons to Other Organizations

Similar to "sacrifices" in job embeddedness theory, many stayers weighed what they would have to give up if they left. For example, some stayers considered leaving the organization to find a job with better pay, but ultimately stayed because they would not have the same flexibility in another position. However, within the comparisons category, results revealed additional negative sides to retention. For example, some stayers discussed "lack of better opportunities" as a reason for staying, even when they were dissatisfied with their position. Specifically, some stayers discussed problems that exist across mental health care organizations such as low pay, which led them to stay (e.g., expressing the sentiment that things aren't going to change if they move, so why move?). These problems highlight larger system issues within mental health care such as underfunded programs and overworked, underpaid staff that keep employees "stuck" in positions rather than contribute to why they willingly stay.

Practical Implications

Organizations should consider how to maintain job satisfaction given research suggesting job embeddedness in the form of stuckness is associated with negative performance outcomes. For instance, employees are more likely to engage in negative or destructive behaviors at work because they feel stuck (Marasi et al., 2016). Marasai et al. (2016) suggest that in order to combat "stuckness" among employees, it may be important to alert employees of other job opportunities or increase employee's sense of autonomy and ability to move within different

positions in the orgnaization. Indeed, many stayers discussed the ability to move to a different position within the organization as a reason for staying, even in times when they considered leaving. As such, it may be necessary to employ job crafting and opportunities for growth (as desribed above) to not only retain employees, but also to prevent "stuckness" and maintain positive performance outcomes of existing employees.

Differences in Stay Reasons Between White and Black Stayers

In addition to reasons for staying that were common across all stayers (i.e., core factors), results also found differences within these core factors between White and Black stayers. The differences were found in "work as a calling" and "opportunities for growth or meaningful contribution."

Prior to understanding these differences in core factors, special consideration should be paid to the average tenure between Black and White stayers (13 vs. 21 years) in our sample. This difference may indicate the potential racialized experiences among stayer populations. A recent review on structural racism and workforce diversity indicates that despite efforts to increase racial diversity within the mental health workforce, whiteness in organizational leadership remains a key factor in the maintenance of structural racism within mental health organizations. For example, maintaining a predominately White leadership team socializes employees to adhere to a racialized social system where employees of color are expected to work under White leaders and serves to maintain an overall white worldview within the organization (Kyere & Fukui, 2022). This idea may be relevant to the difference found between Black and White stayers regarding "opportunities for growth or meaningful contribution." Specifically, 45% of White stayers in the sample identified a reason for staying as the ability to make organizational change for example, by having a voice in organization policy, while only one of the Black stayer

participants described related opportunities to impact organizational change (by serving on various committees). Gaining such opportunities often contributed to stayers' sense of accomplishment, positive perceptions of leadership, and feeling that the organization valued their contribution. The findings are in line with previous research indicating that having a voice in decision making within an organization increases employees' sense of control over work processes, satisfaction with working conditions, and makes them feel like valued members of the organization, which in turn decreases the chance of turnover (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). However, these opportunities might be perceived less often among Black stayers compared to White stayers in our sample.

Another difference identified between White and Black stayers was within the "work as a calling" core factor for reasons why stayers stay at their mental health organization. Specifically, while both White and Black stayers discussed their passion for the population they work with, only Black stayers related this passion back to their personal communities such as their experience with understanding mental illness growing up in a predominately Black community. This personal experience within the community often added to Black stayers' motivation for why they wanted to work with the organization's client population, which was majority African American/Black. Our qualitative study with a small, selected sample does not provide the generalizable interpretation to understand the source of difference. However, one possible factor may be that Black stayers might be in closer proximity to clients relative to White stayers, given their average tenure and roles within the organization—White stayers with longer tenure might serve in managerial or leadership roles, while, as noted by a participant "A lot of them [people of color] are direct care staff" [S221]). Although we do not have objective measures, the literature indicates that employees of color tend to be disproportionately concentrated to frontline

positions as part of organizational strategy to attract diverse clientele in the community (Kyere & Fukui, 2022). However, such strategies may also result in additional turnover among people of color. For example, frontline mental health workers and Black mental health professionals who greatly empathize with the communities they serve are at greater risk for burnout/compassion fatigue (Norris & Primm, 2023; Ray et al., 2013). Additionally, organizations may increase diversity among frontline workers while maintaining White leadership to appeal to diverse clientele for economic gains rather than for healthcare equity, further increasing racial disparities across job positions (Kyere & Fukui, 2022). Although we cannot draw direct conclusion based on our findings, it is important to further explore the differences in future research.

Practical Implications

Taken together, understanding reasons why employees stay at an organization may be a useful tool in developing retention strategy plans for organizations (e.g., conducting stay interviews; Steel et al., 2002). Further, considering the potential racial differential experiences may ultimately enhance the potential benefits of this exercise to retain a diverse mental health workforce. For example, Kyere & Fukui (2022) recommend conducting Human Resource analysis of stay interviews with employees using a race-conscious framework (e.g., identifying possible differences in retention among different racial minority groups within the organization). Doing so may highlight specific areas within the mental health organization that create and help systems of diversity, equity, and inclusion for employees. At the same time, additional research is needed to understand how mental health organizations may specifically disentangle from the interconnected system of structural racism as much as possible, such as intervening with the structural hierarchies within the organization (Kyere & Fukui, 2022). Lastly, Black mental health professionals who empathize greatly with the communities they serve must be provided with

additional resources of support (e.g., opportunities to join networks for Black mental health professionals to process their experiences; Norris & Primm, 2023) to combat against possible burnout and compassion fatigue.

Limitations

The current study is the first to examine long-term employees' reasons for staying in a CHMC. Average job tenure for participants in the current study was 17 years, which may represent substantial job longevity compared to other research examining stayer narratives in the mental health field (e.g., child protective service agents had an average of 15 years; Burns et al., 2020). Despite these strengths, the current study must also consider certain limitations. Specifically, in order to recruit a more diverse sample, we had to lower the tenure criterion to 7 years for Black stayers. As such, the difference between White and Black stayers' average tenure was large (21 years vs. 13 years, respectively), and this difference in tenure could have contributed to the differences observed across White and Black stayers, such as Black stayers not having as many opportunities to make organizational changes due to shorter tenure. Additionally, it may also be indicative of the times in which these stayers were hired, reflecting broader trends of lack of diversity in healthcare overall (Sullivan Commission on Diversity in the Health Workforce, 2004). Therefore, additional research understanding factors that can contribute to increased diversity among long-term stayers is critical.

Further, stayers that were eligible, but chose not to participate may have had different experiences within the organization compared to those who chose to participate and our data do not speak to those possible differences. Relatedly, as with any interview-based study, this study relies on participant recall and description which may be subject to bias or reconstruction of past events in light of later understandings. The purpose of collecting stayer narratives was to gather

employees' personal perspectives on why they stayed and verification of claims made about organizational or decision-making processes and job expectations was beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, this study also took place on Zoom, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some narratives involved changes related to the pandemic (e.g., not seeing clients in person), themes appeared broader and relevant to prior literature, suggesting that this may not have had a large impact on the findings.

Further, other forms of diversity that participants may have identified as, including members of the LGBTQIA^{+} community or disability status, was not collected. The study also did not include members of other racial/ethnic groups beyond Black and White participants, given that other racial groups did not meet our stayer criterion for this study. As such, the current study's stay narratives do not speak to the additional challenges that may be present in building a career within the mental health workforce as a member of other minority populations or how these identities intersect to create unique stay experiences for different populations.

Conclusions

Given the costs associated with high turnover rates and the consideration of job wellbeing among the mental health workforce, examining factors facilitating employee retention strategies are crucial. Interviews with long-term employees working at a CHMC revealed four core factors related to their tenure at the organization: work as a calling, supportive relationships, opportunities for growth/meaningful contribution, and personal attributes. Further, some reasons for staying may not necessarily be through a positive experience, but rather a what some considered a necessity given the circumstances, including lack of better opportunities when comparing to other organizations. Taken together, employee retention within mental health organizations may be improved through multiple factors such as fostering relationships among

coworkers, supervisor training to facilitate autonomy supporting environments, job crafting, and connecting employees back to their passion/mission. However, when analyzing stay narratives, mental health organizations should also consider how differences in the stay experience between employees of different races/ethnicities create differential experiences in retention across the organization. Doing so highlights opportunities to further combat structural racism on retention within mental health organizations, including creating opportunities for Black employees' voices to be heard and acted upon within the organization, diverse representation within leadership. Future research should consider factors contributing to employee retention in mental health care among intersecting employee identities and across different mental health care settings (e.g., additional CHMCs, acute mental health services).

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Tables

Table 1

Sample Demographics

	Total Sample (N = 22)		White Stayers (n = 11)		Black Stayers (n = 11)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age	53.7	9.1	56.0	10.7	52.0	7.1
Work years in the organization	17.0	5.9	21.0	4.2	13.0	4.4
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Men	8	36.4	5	45.5	3	27.3
Women	14	63.6	6	54.5	8	72.7
Marital Status						
Married	11	50.0	7	63.6	4	36.4
Single	11	40.0	4	36.4	7	63.6
Full-time						
Full-time	20	90.9	11	100	9	81.8
Exempt						
Exempt	11	50.0	7	63.6	4	36.4
Non-exempt	11	50.0	4	36.4	7	63.6
Upper-Level Position	9	40.9	6	54.5	3	27.2

Note. Upper-level positions include team leaders, managers, directors, or individuals in leadership positions.

Table 2

Stayer Code Book

Code	Definition	Sample Quote
Population/Passion	Being passionate about the type of work or the population they are working with	*"Well, I really like the work that I do. And it's so specialized that there's really nothing else like it. We're the only agency that provides mental health services to the [specific population served]. So, you know, I really like this. And I just can't imagine leaving it."*
Valued	Feeling valued by the organization, or that the organization valued their input	*"I can absolutely tell you that I saw was able to see a lot of changes at the [department name] level…and some policy changes there, in the courts, and some ways that they did some things over the 15 years and am thrilled to say that I had a voice in that"*
Flexibility/Autonomy	Emphasizing self-direction in the job, such as having the choice to do things that interest them, scheduling flexibility, designing their own position within the organization	*"And I think another thing that's helped me to stay, motivated me to stay, is the sense that I get, that I have of being as autonomous as I want to be in my job and in what I do. And I feel like I'm a person who knows when to ask for help and knows when to bring somebody in for feedback or what have you. But for the most part, I'm kind of a person who is just like, well, tell me what my job is, and I'll do it. You don't have to worry about it. You know?"*
Routine/Job Longevity	Emphasizing generational or personal values about needing to stay in a position for a long time or valuing routine over change	*"I think it's maybe the type of person. I think some people are more inclined to be rolling stones and other people kind of want a routine to add to their lives. And if they find one that's comfortable that they feel fulfilled, like they can perform a task and fulfill that task, and there's value to what they do, those are people that are going to stay."*
Supervisor	Describing a good relationship with supervisor/superiors	*"I think having good supervisors and program managers help, that they're supportive. And you can have supervision with them and talk things through, I think is very*

		helpful. I've been fortunate to have good supervisors long term."
Team	Describing a good relationship with team/coworkers	*"Anyone that's ever visited our agency whether it's licensing agencies, or [city] leaders, potential donors, it doesn't matter, everyone is just always blown away by the culture here, the openness, the welcoming, outstanding staff that are just highly skilled, highly committed to the population that we serve, very passionate about what we do. And that's the majority of the people that work here, and it's palpable when you're in the building. And so, that's continued throughout my career."*
Mission	Person's core beliefs align with the mission of the organization	*"Well, partly I think it's because the mission hasn't changed, you know, the vision. Even though we've merged with [agency] and kind of become a little bit of a different agency then what I started with, the vision and the mission is still more or less the same."*
Growth	Valuing opportunities for growth (personal or professional) within their position	*"And I've had the opportunity to make progress. And I know some people don't, right. We're at a place where we're kind of holding steady for a minute. But there will be another bit of growth in a couple of years. But it's like for those folks that are ready now to move, they might go. So, opportunities, as long as there are opportunities to grow, and contribute, and do work that people feel is meaningful, and they have a role, and it's one that aligns with their values, I think we're in good shape."*
Comparison	Positively comparing this organization to other agencies or lack of better opportunities from other jobs	*"The place isn't perfect. But I tell you, it's a lot closer to perfect I think than most of the other mental health sites around town."*
Other factors (developed into Personal attributes)	Other things that stayers mention that are reasons for staying that are not captured in above codes. (a personal attribute or personality trait that stayers perceive as something that helped them stay at the organization perhaps longer than others)	*"And there's some people, maybe myself included, who are willing just to kind of go with it, and maybe, try to keep it on the table but not necessarily say, okay. I'm out of here."*