

# Relationship between Transformational Leadership in Social Work Organizations and Social Worker Turnover

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**Abstract Objective:** It is not a new phenomenon that there is a high turnover rate among social workers. In particular, child welfare has shown the highest rates of staff turnover. To address the issue, turnover and retention of social workers have been studied for decades. The history of research produced a long list of determinants for social worker turnover, more than 10 factors, and showed conflicting findings with the same variables. However, the long list of factors influencing workers' decision to leave has poorly contributed to organizational practices for retaining social workers. The purpose of this study was to develop and suggest conceptual model for the relationship between transformational leadership and the other four factors for social worker turnover and turnover. **Method:** This study reviews the literature on factors for social work turnover, leadership styles in social work organizations, and the relationship between social worker turnover and transformational leadership. This study will weigh the roles of child welfare organizations in preventing avoidable staff turnover in child welfare organizations. **Result:** This integrative research literature review provides the possible research agenda on the relationship between transformational leadership in social work organizations and social worker turnover by discovering the gaps of the present studies on factors for social work turnover, especially a leadership factor. Particularly, it is assumed, according to the comprehensive literature review and critical theory review, that transformational leadership in child welfare organizations can create a positive and supportive culture in organizations for employees. The effect of transformational leadership on social worker turnover intention has been overlooked even though studies have shown the effectiveness of the leadership style in social work organizations.

**Keywords** Transformational leadership, Social worker retention, Social worker turnover, Leadership in social work organization

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## 1. Background/ Objectives and Goals

The effectiveness of organizational performances within social work or the fields associated with social work (social or human service organizations) can be accomplished by integrating a variety of resources, such as financial resource, human resource, and network. Especially, human resource is very important to effective and even efficient performances in social work organizations because services cannot be properly delivered to clients without social workers. At the age that cost effective management and care management are prevalent, human resource becomes a key factor for organizational effectiveness. Pynes (2009) described that high quality of social work service and practices cannot be achieved without highly qualified and skilled social workers or practitioners, regardless of agency resources. Recruiting and preserving qualified and experienced practitioners are key factors in social work organizations' overall successful

performances, including especially, providing the most effective services to their clients (Daly, Dudley, Finnegan, Jones & Christiansen, 2001). Toward this goal, turnover and retention of social workers have been studied for decades (Powell, & York, 1992; Hwang, & Hopkins, 2012), and over ten factors for social worker turnover have been discovered, including leadership. Leadership was referred to as a moderating factor in a study on health care providers' turnover by Green, Miller, & Aarons (2011). However, few studies focused on a specific leadership style that keeps more social workers from leaving their organizations.

Although social work agencies have a high staff turnover rate when compared with other professions (Daly et al., 2001), the average rate of social worker turnover and retention in social and human services organizations varies from 10% up to 50% annually, depending on literature (Alliance for Children and Families et al., 2001; Mack, 2001; Gallon, Gabriel, & Knudsen, 2003; Glisson, Schoenwald, Kelleher, Landsverk, Hoagwood, Mayberg, & Green, 2008; Pasztor, Saint-Germain, & DeCrescenzo, 2002, Sundell, & Haggman, 1999). This high turnover rate among social workers is problematic not only nationally but also internationally. For example, studies which examined

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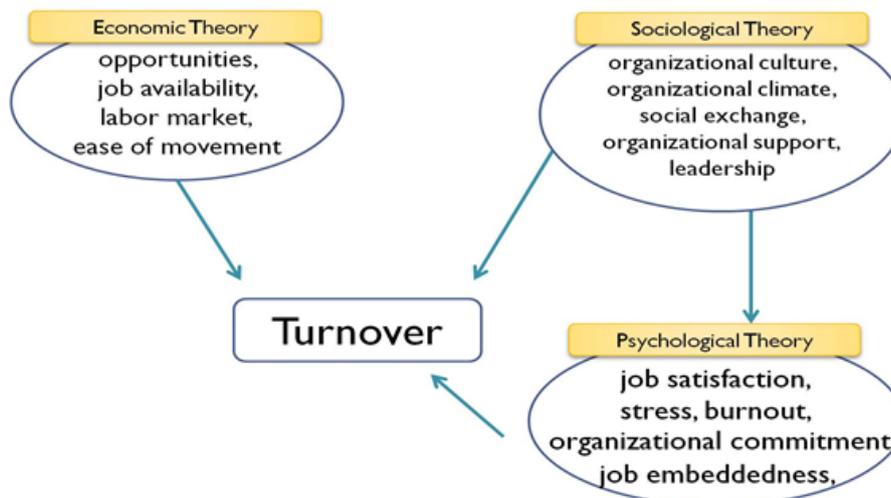
predictors, antecedents and factors for employee’s turnover have been conducted internationally such as Australia, United Kingdom, Wales, Sweden, South Korea as well as U.S (Evans & Huxley, 2009, Tham, 2007, Webb & Carpenter, 2011). Table 1 illustrates how diverse the staff turnover rate in social work is in the different nations and fields. Also, those studies on the turnover and retention rate discovered multiple factors for the social workers to leave or remain in their organizations, such as compensation, organizational culture, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, workloads etc. (Siefert, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1991, Poulin, & Walter, 1992, Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007, Lambert, Cluse-Tolar, Pasupuleti, Prior, & Allen, 2012).

The high turnover rate has direct and indirect costs to the organization (Iglehart, 1990; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin,

2001; Lambert et al., 2012). Directly, an organization has to spend money on recruiting, replacing, and training new employees (Mor Barak, et al., 2001). Indirectly, a vacated position will impact coworkers who still remain and have to replace the job (Iglehart, 1990). Worker turnover also can affect the service quality due to lack of service continuity. Clients who have experienced shorter and less services, because their practitioners quit in the middle of treatment, might feel discarded and distrust the organization. In addition, in the age of cost-effective management, social work agencies should reduce qualified employee turnover. Adopting an effective leadership type can help social work organizations reduce the turnover rate of their valuable employees who are the most significant resources for the effective performances and the continuity of providing services to organizations’ clients.

**Table 1.** Recent Staff Turnover Rate in Socia Work

Source	Region	Field	Rate	Survey Year
Alliance for Children and Families et al., 2001	U.S Nationwide	All	Front line worker: 19%-41% S.W Supervisor: 8-28%	2001
APHSA, 2005	U.S. Nationwide	Child welfare	Average Turnover Rate: 22%	1999-2000
Child Welfare League of American, 2001	U.S Nationwide	Child welfare	Turnover rate: 20%-40%	2001
Evans et al., 2009	U.K Wales	All	Turnover rate: 12%-18.8%	2004
Glisson et al., 2008	U.S. Nationwide	Mental health	Average Turnover Rate: 14% (up to 51%)	2004-2005
Gallon, S. L., 2003	U.S Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington	Treatment services	Average Turnover Rate: 25%	2000
Jonsson et al., 2003	Sweden	All	Turnover rate: 41%	2002
Sundell & Haggman, 1999	Sweden 10 Municipities	Child welfare	Turnover rate: 42%	1997-1998



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model of Turnover Theories

This paper will first discuss the definitions of retention and turnover of social workers and the factors which predict their decisions of retention and turnover as an independent variable. Previous research has identified a variety of predictors and factors associated with employee turnover and retention. Those factors are categorized in three theoretical frameworks: 1) economic theory consisted of opportunities, job availability of acceptable alternative, labor market and ease of movement (Steel, 1996); 2) psychological theory consisted of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, effect of stress, burnout and job embeddedness (Weaver, Chang, & Gil de Gibaja, 2006); 3) sociological theory consisted of specifics of workplace situations and job, affect theory of social exchange, organizational support (Weaver et al., 2006). Based on the three theories, a conceptual model of turnover theories was provided in figure 1.

*Purpose of the Study* Among the factors drawn from the turnover theories, this study will primarily focus on factors which can be controlled by organizations in order to help organizations develop a practice to enhance the retention rate or reduce the turnover rate among social workers. In fact, the factors which belong to the economic theory cannot be controlled by one organization. Based on the literature review, to date, there are few studies on examining the relationship between leadership and social worker turnover or retention (Yoon, & Kelly, 2008). However, some research revealed there are the relationship between a leadership style and job satisfaction, stress, burnout, organizational culture, and organizational commitment which are considered as the direct factors for turnover. Especially, transformational leadership has a positive relationship with those factors for social worker turnover. Therefore, this study is to examine the impact of transformational leadership on reducing social worker turnover rate, by reviewing the interaction of transformational leadership with job satisfaction, stress, organizational culture, and organizational commitment. Thus, the conceptual model for the relationship between transformational leadership and the other four factors for social worker turnover and turnover will be presented after reviewing literature on the topic.

## 2. Methods

### Critical Review of Literature

*Definition of Turnover* Traditionally, there are two major types of turnover: voluntary and involuntary turnover (Lambert et al., 2012). Voluntary turnover is the movement initiated by an employee while movement initiated by other factors rather than the decision of an employee is called involuntary turnover (Bluedorn, 1978). When employees cannot control their turnover, such as retirement, dismissals, layoffs and death, it is taken into account as an involuntary turnover (Bluedorn, 1978). This study has identified turnover intent as an important factor in predicting actual movements of an employee through literature reviews.

The research of workforce turnover in social work and

human service has been conducted in two ways. One way is investigating actual turnover rate, and the other is to predict actual turnover with turnover intent. The best predictor of turnover is intention to quit (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979). Because of the downside of the feasibility of longitudinal research on workers' turnover, many studies have used the workers' stated intention to leave the job as the outcome variables rather than wait to see who actually leaves (Weaver, Chang, & Gil de Gibaja, 2006).

*Factors for Turnover and Retention* Previous research has identified the diverse predictors and antecedents associated with employee turnover and retention. Those factors are derived from empirical research based on the three theoretical frameworks: economical theory, sociological theory, and psychological theory. The three theories are offered by social science, not by social work, because most research on workforce turnover within social work is relatively atheoretical and focuses on predictors rather than developing theoretical frameworks (Weaver et al., 2006). However, those predictors studied in social work field can be matched with factors from the three theoretical frameworks except for the personal characteristics which constitute of age, gender, years in an organization, years of experience, education, tenure, salary, etc (Glisson, & Durick, 1988). In this study, only the factors related to leadership style will be reviewed for the purpose of this research.

While focusing on the factors which organizations can control, this study found that organizational culture and climate, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and job stress were direct and sometimes indirect factors to predict social worker turnover and retention (Glisson et al., 2008; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Gill, Flaschner, & Shachar, 2006; Kim, 2008; Kim, 2009; Lambert et al., 2012; Hwang & Hopkins, 2012). Especially, organizational culture and climate was found influencing the other three factors (Lambert et al., 2012, Glisson & Durick, 1988). Organizational culture and organizational climate is categorized in organizational factors or sociological theory, and the other three factors – job satisfaction, stress, and organizational commitment – are classified into worker attitude the factors or psychological theory.

*Psychological Theory* The focuses of psychological theory are on individual characteristics and the ability of individuals to adjust to and deal with organizational climate and culture (Weaver et al., 2006). Psychological theory explained employee turnover with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, stress and burnout. Todd and Deery-Schmitt (1996) stated that some psychological researchers have paid attention to the effect of stress on turnover. In social work, job satisfaction stress, and burnout have been the most frequently found in literature of employee turnover and retention. Job satisfaction and stress have been used as direct factors for employee turnover or retention. Job satisfaction is sometimes considered as an indicator for organizational culture and climate (Daly, et al., 2001; Arches, 1991).

Job satisfaction as a predictor for worker turnover has a

long history in research on the topic. The earliest conceptual work about the relationship between job satisfaction and worker turnover was developed by Potter and Steers (1973). In the work, the authors broke down the broad concept of job satisfaction to predict employee turnover into four categories which were related to job, work environment and personal factors and found job satisfaction had a negative relationship with turnover (Potter, & Steers, 1973). In the recent year, Potter, Comstock, Brittain, & Hanna (2009) studied the relationship of social work intention to stay in her/ his organization with job satisfaction in child welfare agencies and found that job satisfaction had a strong relationship with retention intention.

Along with job satisfaction, a stress factor has a long history of research on predictors for worker turnover. Stress has been consistently discovered to be one of the strongest factors of turnover or retention intention (McKee, Markham, & Scott, 1992; Mor Barak, et al., 2001, Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Todd, & Deery-Schmitt, 1996). The study to set out turnover intention among child welfare workers showed that a stressful work environment has a positive relationship with turnover intention (Mor Barack, et al., 2006). Mor Barack et al. (2006) also found that the strongest direct predictors for turnover intention were lack of job satisfaction, high stress, younger age, and lower organizational commitment. Both job satisfaction and stress factor has been shown to be the strongest predictors for worker turnover in abundant research. However, more recently, both predictors have been studied with other factors, such as organizational climate, organizational culture, and organizational commitment, in order to find the factors to make workers satisfied or stressed with their job (Mor Barack, et al., 2006, Pham, 2007).

Organizational commitment is the attachment between workers and the organization (Lambert et al., 2012). Organizational commitment is defined as workers' contribution to, loyalty to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Kim, & Stoner, 2008; Lambert et al., 2012; Mor Barak et al., 2006). The more attached to the organization workers are, the lower intention to leave they have (Lambert et al., 2012). In a test of turnover model which placed the organizational commitment as a direct factor which was influenced by job satisfaction, organizational structure, and personal characteristics, the study found that the three factors impacted workers' commitment to the organization and thus, workers tend to consider whether to leave the organization or not (Lambert et al., 2012). In the study, organizational commitment was a direct factor and job satisfaction indirect. However, a study to examine commitment and job satisfaction as factors for social worker turnover intention (Freund, 2005) designed model that job satisfaction was a direct predictor and commitment was an indirect factor which influenced workers' satisfaction with the job. The study results supported their conceptual model for turnover intention among welfare workers. In addition, Mor Barak et al. (2006) analyzed the relationship between job satisfaction and

organizational commitment in the study on modeling turnover intention of child welfare workers and found that the two factors influenced each other and each factor had direct impact on worker turnover.

*Sociological Theory* Sociological theory focuses on the details of workplace situations and job characteristics and their influences on the satisfaction with and commitments to organizations of workers (Weaver et al., 2006). That is, employees weigh rationale of regulations and actions by their superiors and judge whether to subordinate or not. Employees, of course, expect the more legitimate regulations and actions from organizations and their superiors (Halaby, 1996). According to organizational theory, organizational climate was the older term and have a long history of research in organizational behavior and effectiveness (Glisson et al., 2008; Schein, 1990). On the contrary, organizational culture was somewhat newer term than climate and referred to norms, values, expectations, and perceptions (Glisson et al., 2008; Schein, 1990). While climate is a more surface observation of the workplace culture, organizational culture is defined as the patterns of norms and attitudes shared and established by the members and given groups (Schein, 1990; Tham, 2007).

Most of the studies on organizational culture and climate have been related with job satisfaction, stress, and commitment (Glisson, & James, 2002; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; Tham, 2007). Recently, organizational culture and climate were used as indirect factors for worker turnover in many studies (Aarons, & Sawitzky, 2006; Hawng, & Hopkins, 2012; Lambert et al., 2012; Mor Barak, 2006). As indirect factors, organizational culture and climate influenced work attitudes of workers and then the attitudes impacted the decision to leave or remain in the organization. Although most studies have agreement on the indirect roles of the two factors, Glisson, and James (2002) discovered an interesting result that organizational climate was a mediator in the relationship between organizational culture and work attitudes. Later, Aaron, and Sawitzky (2006) supported the previous research findings by examining the simultaneous impact of organizational culture and climate on work attitude and their subsequent impact on turnover. In their study, the researchers found that organizational culture directly influenced the work attitudes as well as indirectly impacted through organizational climate. Also, the study showed that constructive culture had positive relationship with positive work attitudes, and defensive culture has negative relationship with positive work attitudes (Aarons, & Sawitzky, 2006).

While there are studies examining the mediating effects of organizational culture and climate, Glisson et al. (2008) studied therapist turnover in mental health clinics by examining a function of organizational culture and climate as direct factors. In the study, the researchers found that only organizational climate was significantly correlated with therapist turnover (Glisson et al., 2008). However, Tham (2007) stressed that organizational culture is the most important factor for the social worker turnover intention in

the study on the organizational factors for turnover intention among social workers in child welfare. In addition, Shim (2010) examined the direct effect of organizational culture and climate on turnover among child welfare workers and found that both factors have statistically significant relationship with turnover. Specifically, the study indicated that constructive culture and positive climate of the organization were positively correlated with worker turnover (Shim, 2010).

*Leadership Theories for Turnover* Burns (1978) began the term, transformational leadership, as an important approach to leadership theory by proposing two kinds of leadership; transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is concerned with motivation and the morality of followers. Bass, & Avolio (1997) described four factors of transformational leadership: idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation (inspiration), intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Leaders who have the characteristic of idealized influence present a vision and act as powerful role model for followers. Followers want to emulate the leaders (Gellis, 2001).

Inspirational motivation describes leaders who communicate and share a vision of the organization and motivate followers to build confidence and commit to the vision (Gellis, 2001; Northouse, 1997). Intellectual stimulation refers to functions that facilitate followers to be creative and innovative and challenge them to break their past belief and values (Northouse, 1997). Individual consideration is related to the supportive environment of the organization. Leaders who have this characteristic will treat followers with care and concern. As a result, transformation leadership reflects higher performance of followers as a consequence of the functions of the four factors (Gellis, 2001).

Research on leadership style in social work or human service organizations mostly focused on its relationship with job satisfaction, organizational culture and climate, organizational performance, and organizational effectiveness (Elpers, & Westhuis, 2008; Medley & Larochelle, 1995; Gellis, 2001, Packard, 2009; Jaskyte, 2004). Packard's (2009) study on how leadership impacts the organizational culture and climate found that a leader played an important role to establish the organizational culture and climate and was an intermediate factor for job satisfaction. In the study on the impact of leadership on organizational culture, Schein (1985) stated that leadership primarily impacted shaping the organizational culture.

According to Watson, and Abzug (2010), the quality of the relationship between staff members and leaders is a key factor for employees' intention to remain in the organization. Also, Smith (2010) discussed the importance of effective executive leadership in nonprofit organizations in terms of staff turnover, morale, and client dissatisfaction. Research on social worker turnover found that leadership or a leader in the organization had relationship with worker turnover (Evans, & Huxley, 2009). The study showed that staff who

was dissatisfied with their employers was more likely to leave the organization (Evans, & Huxley, 2009). In contrast, Tham (2007) tested the relationship of fair leadership with turnover intention and found that there was no significant relationship when controlling other variables: personal characteristics, work tasks elements, and organizational elements.

Recently, transformational leadership has been considered to have positive relationship with organizational commitment among employees in human service organizations (Abolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004). In addition, studies on the effectiveness of transformational leadership showed that the leadership was positively correlated with job satisfaction, positive culture and climate of the organization (Medley, & Larochelle, 1995; Mary, 2005; Wallace, & Weese, 1995; Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang, & Lawler, 2005). However, there was one study on the effect of transformational leadership on employee turnover among mental health service providers. Green, et al. (2011) revealed that transformational leadership buffered the impact of emotional burnout on turnover intention. The study is the only study that leadership, especially transformational leadership, is tested as a major factor for turnover.

### 3. Results

#### Summary of Findings

Through the intensive literature review, this study discovered that organizational culture and climate, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and job stress were direct and sometimes indirect factors for social worker turnover (Glisson et al., 2008; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Gill, Flaschner, & Shachar, 2006; Kim, 2008; Kim, 2009; Lambert et al., 2012; Hwang & Hopkins, 2012). Job satisfaction and stress have been consistently identified as the strongest factors for social worker turnover throughout the research on turnover and retention intention. Also, the two factors have been used as an indicator for organizational commitment, organizational culture, and organizational climate. In addition, the latter three were found to predict worker turnover intention in a variety of research. When it comes to leadership type in social work organization, a few studies discovered that leadership had impacts on worker turnover. Fair leadership and support and feedback from superior had significantly negative relationship with turnover intention (Tham, 2007).

#### Knowledge Gaps in Social Worker Turnover

Although there are a few studies on relationship between leadership and worker turnover, there are no research examining the primary role of leadership style in social work agencies in predicting social worker turnover. Most studies on leadership style were linked to the organizational culture and organizational climate which were examined as direct as well as indirect factors for worker turnover intention (Tham, 2007; Yoon, & Kelly, 2008). Especially, transformational leadership had a positive relationship with supportive work

environment which is highly connected with positive climate and culture of organizations (Daly, et al, 2001; Glisson et al., 2008; Kim, & Stoner, 2008; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Tham, 2007).

The previous studies on leadership style in social work or human service organizations documented that the transformational leadership was successful, had positive impact on organizational effectiveness and had a positive relationship with job satisfaction (Elpers et al., 2008, Medley & Larochelle, 1995, Gellis, 2001, Mary, 2005). Despite the fact that leadership was discovered to impact job satisfaction, there is no research which focuses on the leadership style as a primary factor for social worker turnover. Based on the literature review, the leadership factor was discovered to be the key element to determine the organizational culture and climate. In addition, the organizational culture and climate is considered to influence the other three factors: organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job stress, which in turn directly impact social worker turnover.

#### 4. Possible Future Research

Based on the review of empirical literature and relevant theories, a conceptual model of a turnover intention study is proposed in Figure 2. The purpose of this model is to examine the complex relationships of transformational leadership style with organizational conditions (organizational culture and climate), worker attitude of jobs, and employee turnover intention. Particularly, it is assumed,

according to the comprehensive literature review and critical theory review, that transformational leadership create a positive and supportive culture and climate of organizations for employees. Furthermore, the organizational culture and climate constructed by transformational leadership will contribute to employees' positive work attitudes of their jobs. Finally, these positive attitudes of jobs will be expected to reduce employees' turnover intention. The model suggested is expected to help to develop policies and practices for human resource management of social work organizations. Eventually, the stable social work workforce will contribute to providing stable quality social services to vulnerable populations.

The present study aimed to examine that employing transformational leadership in social work organizations will keep their qualified social workers from leaving their agencies. Figure 2 will help understand the relationship between those variables which is drawn from the intensive literature review. Also, four possible research hypotheses were suggested below:

Hypothesis 1: Transformational leadership will influence establishing organizational culture and climate.

Hypothesis 2: Organizational culture and climate under transformational leadership will positively relate to work attitude.

Hypothesis 3: Work attitude will positively relate to turnover.

Hypothesis 4: Overall, transformational leadership will negatively relate to turnover.

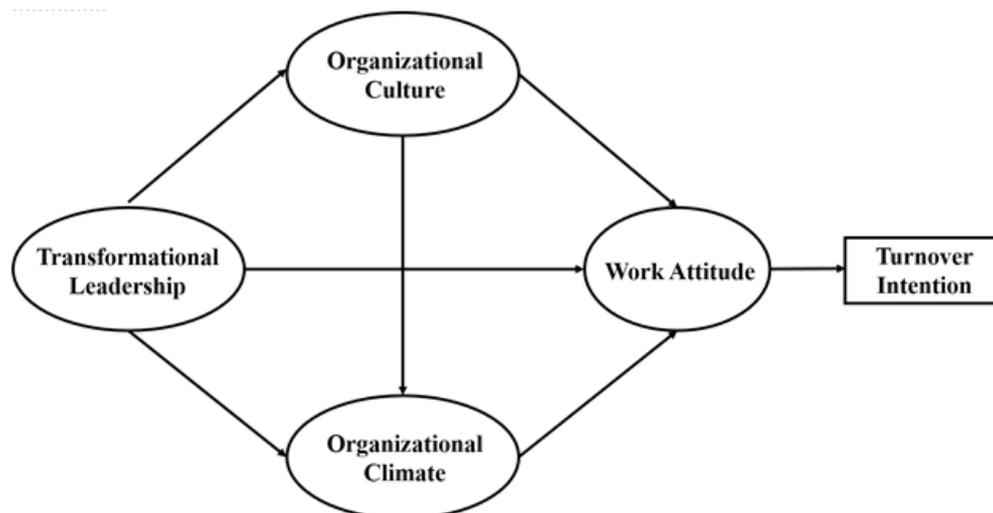


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Social Worker Turnover Intention

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