

AFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND TURNOVER INTENTION OF ACADEMICS IN MALAYSIA: SOCIAL EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE

Tek-Yew Lew,
School of Business, Curtin University of Technology Sarawak Malaysia
CDT 250, 98009 Miri Sarawak Malaysia
lew.tek.yew@curtin.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study aims to test the structural model that explains the relationships between POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention of academics working for four private universities in Malaysia. This study is driven theoretically by the social exchange theory and the organizational support theory. The structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the fitness of the structural model and the hypothesized model represented a good fit to the data. This paper contributes to the limited body of knowledge about the psychological processes underlying the formation of organizational commitment through the perspectives of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001).

Keywords: Perceived Organizational Support, affective organizational commitment, turnover intention.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that the exchange relationship between two parties often goes beyond economic exchange and includes social exchange. Hence, organizational studies argue that employer and employee exchange not only impersonal resources such as money, but also socioemotional resources such as approval, respect, recognition and support (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). In organizational researches, the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the concept of perceived organizational support have been applied to describe the psychological process underlying the employee attitudes and behaviours (Setton, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). The concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which refers to the extent to which the organization values their employees' contributions and cares about their well-being have been used to describe the social exchange relationship between the employer and the employee (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), employees who perceive high levels of POS are more likely to reciprocate the organization with positive attitudes such as higher levels of affective commitment and favorable work behaviours such as commitment to organizational goals and lower intention to leave (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997). The arguments above based on the social exchange theory, the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) which is the commitment of the organization to the employee and the norm of reciprocity is further developed into the organizational support theory (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Since the seminal work on POS by Eisenberger and colleagues (Eisenberger, et al., 1986), many researchers have investigated the effects of POS on important work outcomes such as affective commitment and turnover intention (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 1990; Setton et al., 1996; Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). Meyer and Allen (1997) also indicated that a common theme linking antecedents to commitment is the extent to which the antecedents signal that the organization is supportive of the employee, consistent with the view that they operate via POS. In short, the underpinning social exchange theory predicts that the exchange of favorable treatment could be prolonged if the receipt of resources from another party is highly in need and valuable and the actions are discretionary (Blau, 1964; Eisenberger et al., 1997).

2.0 THE HIGHER EDUCATION INDUSTRY

In the context of the higher education industry, Malaysia aims to be an international hub for world class education in its bid to be a big player in the attractive regional education scene and targets about 100,000 foreign students by 2010. It has 18 public universities, four foreign branch campuses of foreign universities, 21 private universities and 500 private colleges (Uda Nagu, 2007). The private institutions of higher learning is playing an equally important role with the public universities to offer quality higher education and attract foreign students to Malaysia who contribute some RM50 million in direct earnings to Malaysia annually (Uda Nagu, 2007). This trend of globalization, liberalization and reforms to the educational system to improve the ranking of the universities brings many challenges on developing ways to improve staff commitment to universities. One primary criteria for world class universities is the ability to attract and retain excellent and experienced academics.

Academics can be considered the operational core of the universities and their performance determines, to a large extent, the quality of the student's higher education experience and thereby on the contribution that such institutions make to the society (Capellaras, 2005). Academic staff who are well motivated and committed to their institution can build a national and international reputation for themselves and the institution and the universities can attract high caliber students, research funds and consultancy contracts (Rowley, 1996). Based on 'The Academic Reputation Survey' conducted by a team led by the Malaysian Qualifications Board (MQA), no public university in Malaysia were rated in the six-star "Outstanding" category while Universiti Sains Malaysia was the only one rated in the 5-star "Excellent" category (Ramachandran & Foo, 2007). Thus, to improve the ratings of Malaysian universities, it is important to develop a pool of excellent and experienced academics as they play strategic roles to improve ratings in key areas such as research quality, academic reputation of faculty, academic programs quality, research contribution to society, preparation of tomorrow's leaders and quality of graduates.

Over the past decades, local universities continue to face the problem of academic staff turnover or "brain drain" (Khoo, 1981). To the best of knowledge, Malaysian universities may still face the problem of high academic staff turnover though no studies have examined the extent of academic staff turnover in Malaysia in recent years. This voluntary turnover of academic staffs particularly the desirable ones, will not only have a detrimental effect on the

institution both in replacement costs and work disruption, but also jeopardize the nation's aim to produce quality human capital and workforce. It is obvious that the institutions cannot get a return from their investment on faculty members' promotion, training and sabbatical leave. Therefore, understanding the factors that precede organizational commitment can enhance better administrative decisions for the financial support program of faculty members and also the ability to attract and retain good academics.

Furthermore, creating a team of committed and high quality academic staff who are committed to improve teaching and learning methods, strengthening research and innovation, strengthening Malaysia's institutions of high learning to world class standards and enhancing internationalization to turn Malaysia into a leading education hub is an important step towards the creation of apex universities in Malaysia as outlined in National Higher Education Strategic Plan (Atan, 2007).

3.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The higher education industry is very worthy for research as it is now an important sector playing a key role in improving productivity and occupational skills, engaging many academics and students and has numerous links with industrial and community activities as well as enhance the nation's ability to compete in a volatile global knowledge economy (Tight, 2003; Humphreys & Hoque, 2007).

While committed academics are the key towards the successful private universities in Malaysia (Humphreys & Hoque, 2007) and since academics have a high need for support and recognition, there is very little empirical studies thus far which have been conducted to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) to enhance the level of affective commitment of academics using the academics working with the private institutions of higher learning (Rowley, 1996; Capelleras, 2005; Joiner and Bakalis, 2006). Moreover, academics perceived that they have 'lost their voice' as the management of private universities had become increasingly reluctant to listen to them, had lost respect for their knowledge and expertise, had increased their teaching loads and the administrative burden had become, unmanageable (Humphreys & Hoque, 2007). Only one study by Fuller et al. (2006) has found that POS was strongly related to academics' affective commitment to the university.

This study aims to answer the call from recent studies about the affective commitment level of academics such as Rowley (1996), Capelleras (2005) and Joiner and Bakalis (2006) for more studies to be conducted to examine the role of perceived organizational support (POS) towards enhancing the level of affective commitment for academics working outside the western countries.

4.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to test the structural model that explains the relationships between POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention of academics working with four private universities in Malaysia. The hypothesized model is shown below:-

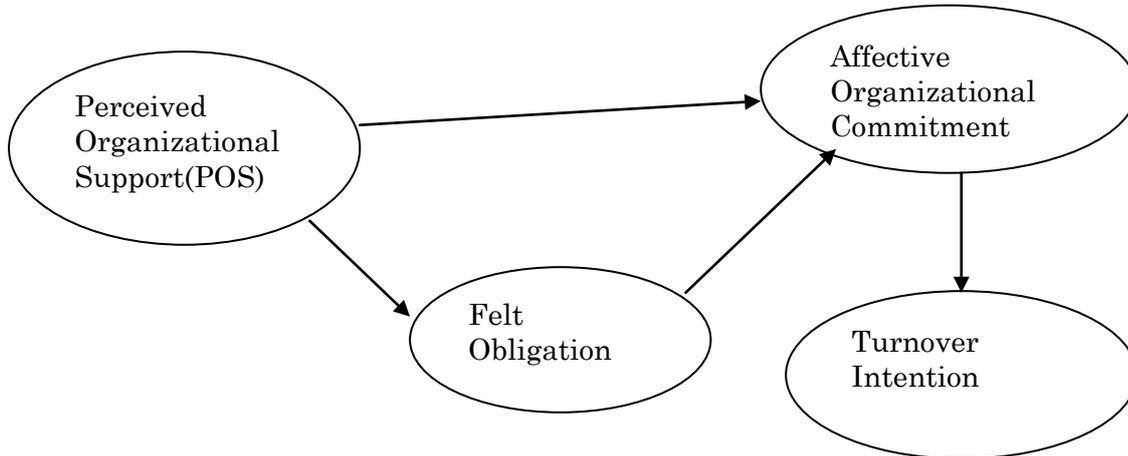


Figure 1: The hypothesized model

5.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study has the potential to contribute to the literature in at least the following aspects. First, this study provides further empirical evidence and validates the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and specifically in the aspect of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) in the employer-employee relationship, by investigating the possible mediating role of felt obligation in the POS- work outcomes relationship.

Tansky & Cohen (2001) has identified perceived organizational support to build organizational commitment among employees. In addition, the empirical findings of Meyer and Smith (2001) identified perceived organizational support as a factor that partially mediate the relationships between HRM practices and organizational commitment. Other studies that have link POS and turnover intentions include Rhoades et al. (2001) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) which linked POS with actual turnover using rewards, procedural justice and supervisory support while Allen at al. (2003) suggests that POS mediates supportive HR on turnover via organizational commitment.

Hence, following the findings of Tansky & Cohen (2001), Meyer and Smith (2001), Rhoades et al. (2001) and Eisenberger et al. (2002) and Allen at al. (2003), this study extends knowledge regarding the mediating process through which POS influences employee attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, this study answers the call by Tan (2008) for more

studies to address the gap on the influence of POS between organizational actions and turnover intention for knowledge workers in Malaysia.

Second, using a sample of academics working for private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) as the context of study offers interesting insights on the management of knowledge workers. This context warrants urgent investigation as private institutions of higher learning (PHEIs) are playing important role to support Malaysia's mission to be the important educational hub. Moreover, knowledge workers are the key source of competitive advantage for the knowledge economy (Drucker, 1999) and most importantly, committed academics will assist the Malaysian Government to develop the quality human capital required by Malaysia. Hence, highly skilled professionals should not be managed as disposable productive resources but rather should be considered as human beings with specific needs and interests (Pare & Tremblay, 2007). Managers need to bolster their sense of self-worth by treating them as intellectual assets, not as operating costs, and by trusting them, supporting their career experiences and fulfill their needs in order to gain sustainable competitive advantage by keeping their employees' skills and experience within the organization rather than outside it (Tan, 2008).

6.0 METHOD

6.1 Procedures

At least 500 survey forms were distributed to the human resource managers of four private universities in Malaysia which have approved this study. Participation was entirely voluntary and the completed questionnaires were forwarded to the HR manager via the internal mail system to maintain anonymity. The researcher collected the completed questionnaires a month after distribution. In total, 134 employees responded, generating an overall response rate of about 27%.

6.2 Participants

The participants were full-time and permanent employees. About 62.7% of the academicians were below 41 years old, their gender were about equal, about 70% are Malaysians and about 55% and 35% were masters and PhD holders respectively. Most of them (47%) were lecturers while 21% were senior lecturers and 15% were associate professors and above. While about 69% of them have more than 5 years of experience as academicians, about 61% of them have less than 5 years tenure at their current university. About 50% of them have less than 10 hours of teaching hours and about 47% of them published less than 5 papers for the past 5 years. Meanwhile, about 60% of them earned less than RM6,001 per month.

6.3 Measures

Through extensive literature review, the variables of this study were measured based on established instruments which have been used by seminal and key past studies as discussed below. All the variables will be measured by the subjects' responses based on the 5-point Likert-type scales (1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree).

Perceived organizational support was measured via a twelve high-loading items from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). The validity and unidimensionality of this scale has been substantiated by previous research such as Eisenberger et al. (1990) and Shore and Wayne (1993). A sample item is “My organization really cares about my well-being.” The cronbach alpha value was 0.87.

Felt obligation was measured by seven items from the scale developed by Eisenberger et al. (2001) which measures employees’ felt obligation to care about the organization and to help the organization reach its goals. A sample item is “I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can to help my company achieve its goals.” The cronbach alpha value was 0.90.

Affective organizational commitment was measured by six items developed by Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) and Meyer & Allen (1997). A sample item is “I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this university”. The cronbach alpha value was 0.90.

Turnover intention was measured by six items which were adapted from Tuma and Grimes (1981), Landau and Hammer (1986) and Wayne et al. (1997). A sample item is “I am actively looking for a job outside my university.” The cronbach alpha value was 0.89.

6.5 Data analysis method

Structural equation modeling (SEM) can be used to conduct a simultaneous test of the entire system of variables in the hypothesized model to examine the extent to which it is consistent with the data (Byrne, 2001). The structural equation modeling (SEM) is chosen to analyze the data because it is a popular statistical technique used by empirical journal articles in the social sciences to test the relationships of independent and dependent variables, is powerful to “redesign” the proposed relationships in the hypothesized model to form several nested models and is more effective in finding the “best fitting” model to the data as suggested by the modification indexes (Cheng, 2001; Kline, 2005; Shore et.al., 2006; Tan, 2008). The SEM is particularly effective to test the hypothesized model in this study that consists of multiple paths to be analyzed with mediating variables, and contain latent constructs such as POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention that are being measured with multiple indicators (Luna-Arocas and Camps, 2008) . The SEM has been used in many organizational studies such as Eisenberger et al. (2001); Eisenberger et al. (2002); Shore et. al., (2006); Lee & Peccei (2007); Maertz et al. (2007); Pare & Tremblay (2007) and Tan (2008). Moreover, the SEM also excels beyond multiple regression, which is a popular statistical technique to test the relationships of independent and dependent variables, in expanding the explanatory ability and statistical efficiency for parsimonious model testing with a single comprehensive method (Cheng, 2001).

7.0 RESULTS

The structural model for the hypothesized model is represented in Figure 1 below. In this model F1 refers to POS, F3 refers to felt obligation, F4 refers to affective commitment and F5 refers to turnover intention.

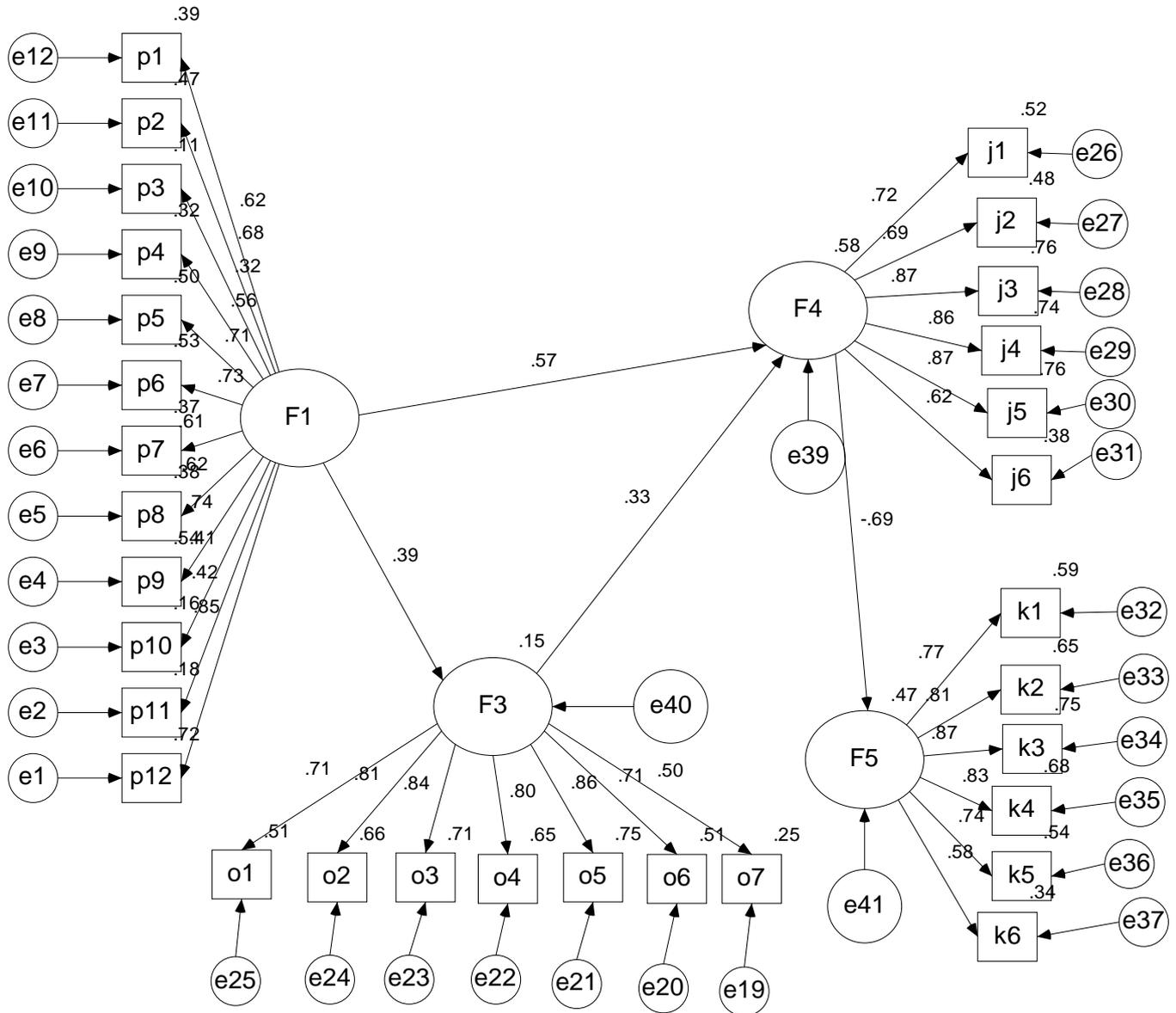


Figure 1: The structural model for the hypothesized model

The model fit indexes for the structural model above is $\chi^2/df= 1.702$; GFI = 0.751; AGFI = 0.713; CFI= 0.875; RMSEA=0.073. The model fit indexes suggest that the structural model above represented a moderately good model fit to the data because of the values of CFI of 0.875 or approximately 0.90 met the recommended cutoff point of 0.90, the value of $\chi^2/df= 1.702$ was below the recommended value of 3 and the value of RMSEA=0.073 was below the recommended value of 0.085 (Byrne, 2001; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004; Hair et al., 2006). However, the value of GFI = 0.751 and AGFI = 0.713 were still below the recommended cutoff point of 0.90. In sum, the model fit indexes suggest that structural model B represented a moderately good model fit to the data.

The assumption of normality was also checked for all the variables in the best fitting structural model B and it was discovered that the skewness and kurtosis values for the variables were below the recommended value of 3 and 10 respectively (Kline, 2005). Hence, the distribution of all the variables did not demonstrate significant departure from normality.

In addition, as shown in Figure 1, all the paths in the best fitting structural model B were significant at the 0.05 level, namely, between POS and felt obligation and the standardized regression weights was 0.39; between POS and affective commitment and the standardized regression weights was 0.57; felt obligation and affective commitment and the standardized regression weights was 0.33; affective commitment and turnover intention and the standardized regression weights was -0.69. The next step was to run the confirmatory factor analysis on the measurement model for the best fitting model to assess the degree of discriminant validity for the constructs of the best fitting structural model. The measurement model for the best fitting structural model is represented in Figure 2 below.

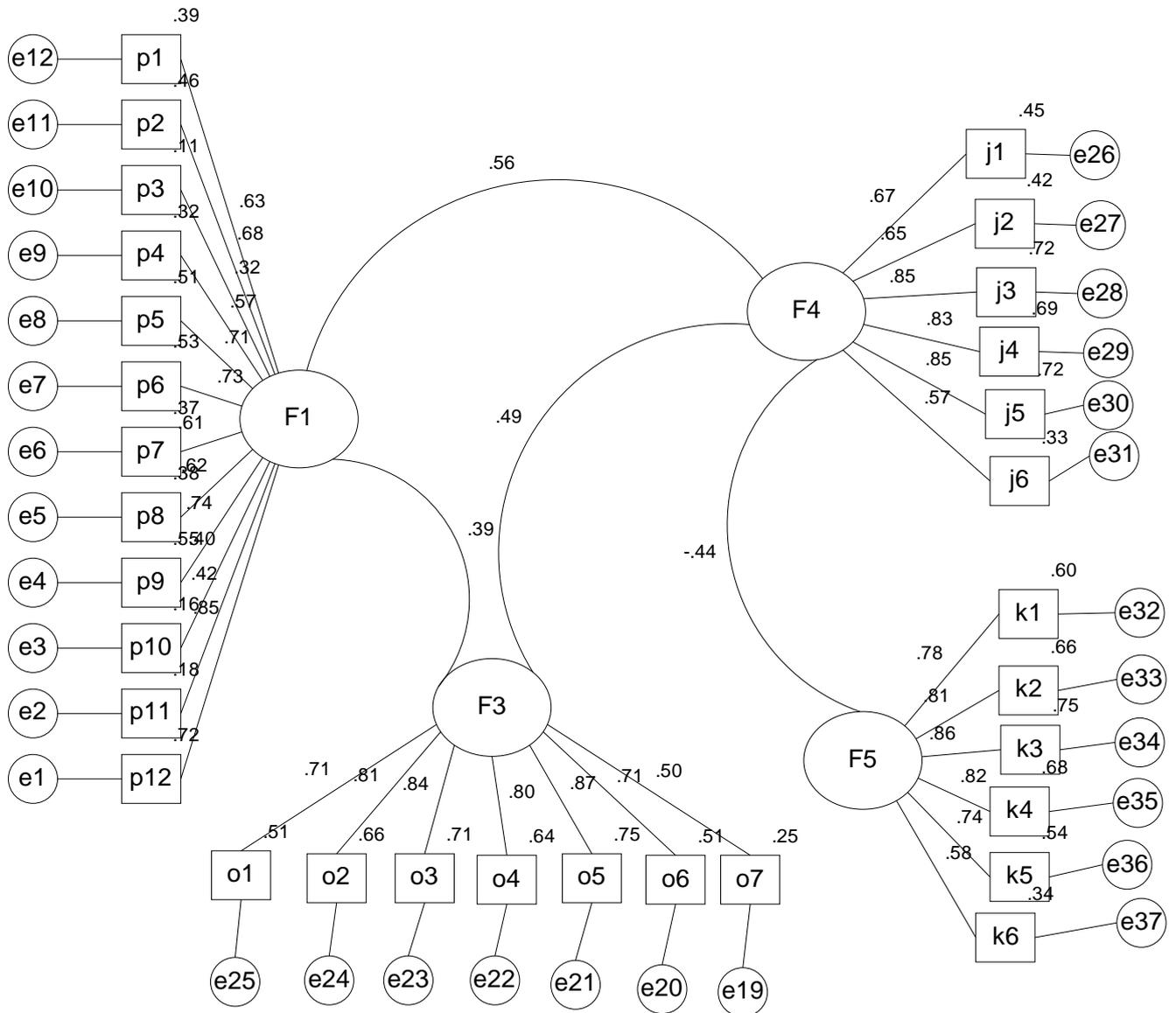


Figure 2: The measurement model

The confirmatory factor analysis suggested a moderately good model fit for the measurement model: $\chi^2 / df = 1.794$; GFI = 0.743; AGFI = 0.703; CFI = 0.858; RMSEA = 0.077. This is because the values of CFI of 0.858 or approximately 0.90 met the recommended cutoff point of 0.90, the value of $\chi^2 / df = 1.794$ was below the recommended value of 3 and the value of RMSEA = 0.077 was below the recommended value of 0.085. However, the value of GFI = 0.743 and AGFI = 0.703 were still below the recommended

cutoff point of 0.90. Furthermore, compared to the one factor model or the Harman's 1 factor model whereby all the indicators of the best fitting structural model were loaded in a single factor ($\chi^2/df= 3.357$; CFI= 0.575; RMSEA= 0.133); the measurement model was a significant improvement, indicating that there were significant relationships among the latent constructs in the structural model. In the measurement model, none of the indicators cross-loaded on other factors and all the indicators loaded significantly ($p<0.001$) onto their respective latent factors. As a result, the concern of common method error was minimized. Thus, the 4-factor measurement model is confirmed and the examination of the best fitting structural model B is valid and justified (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

8.0 DISCUSSION

This study supported a moderately fit best fitting structural model which included the interrelationships between four constructs, namely POS, felt obligation, affective organizational commitment and turnover intention.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that individuals who receive favorable treatments from others are likely to return the other party's favour based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) further proposes that in the employee-employer exchange relationship, employees who believe that they have received high levels of support from the organization tend to reciprocate with positive work attitudes and behaviors that benefit the organization. This study suggest that POS has not only a direct influence on organizational commitment, but also an indirect impact via felt obligation. However, the influence of POS on turnover intention is only through the indirect effect via affective organizational commitment.

POS was found to have both a direct impact on affective organizational commitment ($\beta=0.57$), and an indirect impact mediated by felt obligation. As Eisenberger et al. (1986) pointed out, POS represents employees' beliefs in the organization's commitment to them, and thus employees with higher POS would repay the organization with stronger commitment to the organization. In addition, higher levels of POS create a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well being and helping achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Thus, affective organizational commitment which refers to an individual's identification with and involvement in the employing organization (Porter et al., 1974), may also stem from such a sense of felt obligation. While this mediating process plays a partial role, test of alternative models suggests that felt obligation did not fully mediate the effect of POS on affective organizational commitment. Rather, POS, which represents employees' belief in the organization's commitment to them, has a direct positive impact on the employees' organizational commitment.

Contrary to the prediction, POS has a insignificant direct effect on employees' turnover intention at the 0.05 level. The magnitude of the negative relationship was very weak at -0.17. Thus, the findings of this study is inconsistent with the findings of previous research such as Wayne et al. (1997) and Eisenberger et al. (2001) which had proven the negative relationship between POS and turnover intention.

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) suggest that employees who perceive high levels of support from their organization are inclined to repay the organization. This study suggests that the academicians will repay the organizations who supported them with stronger commitment to the organization and developing a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well being and helping achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001). However, the academicians will not repay the organizations by maintaining membership in the organization, which means they may still have desire to leave the organization though the organization has supported them.

Consistent with previous research, this study supported the relationship that lower commitment to the organization may lead to increased intention to quit (for example, Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Chughtai and Zafar, 2006, Mohamed et al., 2006) with a $\beta=-0.7$. Further, affective organizational commitment fully mediated the relationship between POS and turnover intention. In other words, the influence of POS on turnover intention is only through the indirect effect via affective organizational commitment, which is consistent with the findings of Mohamed et al. (2006).

This study, along with Eisenberger et al. (2001), provides empirical support for organizational support theory's (Eisenberger et al., 1986) contention that POS induces positive work attitudes and behaviors based on the norm of reciprocity. However, results of this study suggested that felt obligation mediates the effects of POS on variables such as affective organizational commitment, but not other variables such as turnover intention. It is possible that the sense of felt obligation may be very important in influencing employees' organizational behaviour during their continued membership or tenure in the organization. The employees' decisions as to whether to stay in the organization may be more influenced by their affective attitudes towards to the organization, which is their level of affective commitment to the organization and alternative employment opportunities available. It is important for future studies to focus more on this concept of felt obligation in studying social exchange relationships, and further determine for which outcome variables felt obligation may play an important role such as employee's performance and organizational citizenship behaviours.

9.0 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has provided further empirical evidence and validates the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the organizational support theory (Eisenberger, et al., 1986; Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and specifically in the aspect of the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) in the employer-employee relationship, by investigating the possible mediating role of felt obligation in the POS- work outcomes relationship. Examination of the mediating role of felt obligation, helps to understand the process through which POS influences employee attitudes and behaviors.

This study suggest that POS has not only a direct influence on organizational commitment, but also an indirect impact via felt obligation. This finding confirms the predictions of the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) that the academicians will repay the universities which supported them with stronger commitment to the organization and developing a sense of felt obligation to reciprocate the organization's support by caring about the organization's well being and helping achieve its objectives (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

It was found that the academics who were more committed to the universities may have less intention to leave which is consistent with the findings of past research such as Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Chughtai and Zafar, 2006, Mohamed et al., 2006). Further, affective organizational commitment fully mediated the relationship between POS and turnover intention. In other words, the academicians who perceive that the universities were supportive of them would be committed to the universities and as a result, would be less likely to leave the universities.

The findings supported the notion that the degree to which the individuals are committed to their profession has an impact on a variety of important organizational outcomes such as affective organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac , 1990; Meyer at al., 1993; Wallace, 1993; Lee at al., 2000 Cetin, 2006; Mohamed et al., 2006).

10.0 CONCLUSION

This study, along with Eisenberger et al. (2001), provides empirical support for organizational support theory's (Eisenberger et al., 1986) contention that POS induces positive work attitudes and behaviors based on the norm of reciprocity. However, results of this study suggested that felt obligation mediates the effects of POS on variables such as affective organizational commitment, but not other variables such as turnover intention. It is possible that the sense of felt obligation may be very important in influencing employees' organizational behaviour during their continued membership or tenure in the organization. The employees' decisions as to whether to stay in the organization may be more influenced by their affective attitudes towards to the organization, which is their level of affective commitment to the organization and alternative employment opportunities available. It is important for future studies to focus more on this concept of felt obligation in studying social exchange relationships, and further determine for which outcome variables felt obligation may play an important role such as employee's performance and organizational citizenship behaviours.

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