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## Determinants of turnover among low wage earners in long term care: the role of manager-employee relationships

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## ABSTRACT

The demand for Long-Term Care (LTC) is steadily increasing as Baby Boomers age and enter retirement. High turnover rates among employees in LTC creates challenges for supervisors and administrators, and can negatively impact quality of care. This study examines manager-subordinate relationship quality using Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) as an antecedent to turnover among low-wage earners in the LTC environment. Survey data measuring LMX, job satisfaction, and demographic information was collected at time 1, and turnover data was collected 18 months later at time 2. The results reveal that all four LMX dimensions were rated significantly different among subordinates who left versus those who stayed, however, only the LMX dimension of supervisor loyalty was a significant predictor of turnover among low wage earners. Our study adds a more nuanced view of the reasons low-wage employees turnover, and presents implications for clinical managers and LTC organizations more broadly.

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## Introduction

Demand for long term care (LTC) is increasing as Baby Boomers age. It is expected that by the year 2050, over 20% of the US population will be 65 years of age or older, and approximately half of those individuals will experience some form of functional or cognitive limitations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the LTC industry is experiencing significant job growth<sup>2</sup> as the need for elderly assistance grows sharply. At the same time, employee turnover across LTC facilities remains high and many facilities struggle to remain fully staffed.<sup>3-5</sup>

LTC includes a variety of different organizational forms including skilled nursing facilities, assisted living facilities,<sup>6</sup> and home health and hospice.<sup>7</sup> The largest number of employees in LTC settings are considered low-wage earners as defined by the Department of Labor.<sup>8</sup> Low wage earners occupy many different positions including those responsible for direct patient care (i.e., certified nursing assistants (CNA) and nurse assistants (NA), as well as those who are indirectly involved in patient care (i.e., dietary, maintenance, and

housekeeping). Although primary caregivers such as CNAs and NAs are more directly involved with patients' activities of daily living, research suggests that LTC environments are increasingly operating in a team-based atmosphere where all positions are considered vital to daily operations.<sup>9</sup> In these team environments, turnover of staff within any of these positions may influence the team's ability to deliver quality patient care.<sup>10-13</sup> In addition, high levels of turnover also increases the challenge of meeting the growing demand for LTC, increases costs for LTC facilities,<sup>14</sup> and is a significant challenge for nurses, nurse managers and administrators.

Low wage earners in the LTC environment are unique in the healthcare system and differ from higher wage positions that require greater education and training.<sup>15</sup> Given that the educational and training requirements are lower for CNAs, NAs and other LTC staff, they have traditionally received lower wages and benefits than their counterparts in other healthcare settings.<sup>16</sup> Low wage earners are generally defined as individuals whose full-time salary falls below the state poverty line for a family of four.<sup>8</sup> Average hourly pay for LTC employees in the U.S. places them squarely in this category. Compared to more highly skilled and credentialed workers, Dill et al. (2013)<sup>5</sup> suggest that low wage earners are more vulnerable because they are typically female, minority, and many are single mothers. Research has not only demonstrated higher average turnover rates

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among low wage earners in LTC,<sup>16,17</sup> but suggests that these employees turnover for different reasons. For example, turnover among CNAs and NAs is more strongly predicted by personal factors (e.g., whether they are the sole breadwinners) and organizational policies (e.g., work hours, scheduling, competitive wages and benefits; Temple, Dobbs, & Andel, 2009<sup>18</sup>), whereas turnover among highly skilled workers is strongly predicted by job attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction; Larrabee, Janney, Ostrow, Withrow, Hobbs, & Burant, 2003<sup>19</sup>).

There is a wealth of literature on the antecedents of turnover in LTC facilities which explores a range of variables including organizational structure,<sup>20</sup> organizational culture,<sup>21</sup> and working conditions.<sup>22</sup> Whereas several studies have also examined the importance of leadership practices on turnover in LTC (see Donoghue & Castle, 2009<sup>23</sup>; Probst, Baek, & Laditka, 2010,<sup>24</sup> Utley, Anderson, Atwell, 2011<sup>25</sup>), the majority examined a particular leadership style such as supportive supervision,<sup>26,27</sup> servant leadership<sup>28</sup> or transformational leadership.<sup>25</sup> This research demonstrates that supportive forms of leadership have a positive influence on job satisfaction<sup>26,29</sup> while reducing both stress and turnover.<sup>27</sup> Yet previous research has failed to examine relationships between managers and caregiving staff (CNAs and NAs), or how the different relationship dimensions relate to turnover in LTC. According to Zhou and Schriesheim (2009),<sup>30</sup> there are many different relationship dimensions that range from being friendly, to demonstrating simple respect, to actively contributing to the subordinate's career goals that go beyond simply demonstrating supportive behaviors. Thus, there is still much to be learned regarding the role that manager-subordinate relationships play in the turnover of LTC employees.

## Theoretical framework

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory shows promise as a framework for examining how the relationships between low wage earners and their supervisors impacts turnover. LMX theory states that leadership is best understood by evaluating the relationship quality between managers and subordinates as both parties are dependent on one another for work outcomes, direction and meeting the organizational mission.<sup>31</sup> When managers and subordinates have high quality relationships, it can lead to more positive experiences at work and intentions to remain with the organization.<sup>32</sup> High quality relationships may be particularly important to low-wage earners in the LTC environment given the nature of their positions and work conditions.

According to LMX, managers and subordinates create different types of relationships as they engage in a variety of social exchanges.<sup>33,34</sup> Social exchanges are behaviors or interactions that take place between a manager and a subordinate in a work environment,<sup>35</sup> and may include both work related directives, as well as sharing of support, advice, and information.<sup>35</sup> As such, managers and subordinates may develop relationships that are more task-based (e.g., focus on collaboration and driving results) or socio-emotionally based (e.g., focused on friendship and loyalty; Zhou & Schriesheim, 2009<sup>30</sup>). In the development of the LMX construct, Dienesch and Liden (1986)<sup>36</sup> identified three primary dimensions of social exchanges, which include contribution (i.e., subordinates helping managers complete tasks and meet work objectives), affect (i.e., subordinates feelings of friendship and liking the manager), and loyalty (i.e., manager defending or standing up for subordinates). A fourth dimension was added in later research by Liden and Maslyn (1998),<sup>35</sup> which measures professional respect (i.e., subordinates' respect for manager's professional capabilities).

LMX theory posits that the four dimensions of LMX (i.e., affect, loyalty, respect, and contribution) may differentially explain subordinate attitudes and behaviors depending on the context and the

job.<sup>36</sup> For example, working professionals with higher certifications and qualifications who earn a higher wage may be more interested in exchanges that promote their career advancement such as taking on new and challenging projects that demonstrate their competence.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, lower credentialed and qualified wage earners may be interested in exchanges that are focused on how their manager treats them as a subordinate.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, low wage earners may be particularly influenced by the socio-emotional dimensions of LMX (i.e., loyalty and affect). For example, when socio-emotional exchanges are strong, subordinates may perceive a more positive and constructive relationship with their manager.<sup>39</sup> These high quality relationships result in greater benefits for the subordinate such as feeling greater respect and security in their job, having greater opportunity to voice concerns, and more input into decision making (Graen & Scandura, 1987<sup>34</sup>; cf. McKinney et al., 2016<sup>40</sup>). When a subordinate reports a low quality relationship, it can negatively affect their job attitudes and increase their intentions to turnover.<sup>41</sup> Subordinates who lack these socio-emotional exchanges with their supervisors, and voluntarily leave the organization, cost the organization money in replacing their position.<sup>42</sup> Although this study seeks to examine differences in all four dimensions of LMX among employees who turned over versus those who were retained, we are especially interested in understanding whether the socio-emotional dimensions of LMX are more predictive than the task-based dimensions. Thus, our research proposes the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1 The LMX dimensions of affect, contribution, loyalty, and respect will be rated significantly lower among those subordinates who turned over compared to those who were retained.*

*Hypothesis 2 The socio-emotional dimensions of affect and loyalty will be the strongest predictors of turnover among LTC employees after controlling for job satisfaction and demographic variables.*

Utilizing the dimensions of LMX as an explanatory construct for turnover in LTC may bring new insight to this growing problem. Although previous research has established a relationship between LMX and turnover,<sup>26,43-45</sup> these studies were conducted with higher wage earners (i.e., RNs), and used a composite measure of LMX rather than looking at each of the four LMX dimensions individually. By examining the four different dimensions of LMX and the extent to which each dimension differentially predicts turnover among low wage earners, our study extends the literature in important ways.

## Methods

### Study design

This study used a cross-sectional methodology to collect data over two time periods. At time 1, participants completed a paper and pencil survey measuring LMX, job satisfaction, and demographic variables. At time 2 (18 months later), the HR department provided a list of all front-line employees who had voluntarily turned over. Data was checked to ensure proper coding of voluntary turnover,<sup>46</sup> and to ensure that all 337 survey respondents were included in the turnover report. An 18-month time frame was chosen based on previous literature in both the management and health care fields to suggest that this is an adequate amount of temporal separation to assess antecedents to turnover.<sup>47-49</sup>

### Participants and context

Participants were recruited from a large vertically integrated LTC organization in the Southeast. At the time of data collection, the organization employed 1,400 employees spread across 22 loca-

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