Linking authentic leadership and employee turnover intention: the influences of sense of calling and job satisfaction

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aims at examining how authentic leadership impacts social workers' withdrawal behaviors through two intermediate mechanisms: sense of calling and job satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional survey was distributed among social workers from 26 social work organizations in the cities of Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen in China ($N = 667$). SPSS was used to conduct preliminary analyses and structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses developed.

Findings – This study found that authentic leadership has a negative direct effect on social workers' turnover intention. In addition, social workers' sense of calling and job satisfaction mediate the relationship between their perceptions of authentic leader behaviors and turnover intention.

Practical implications – Based on this study's findings, the authors suggest social work organizations to invest in authentic leadership development to promote employees' psychological capacities and prevent employee turnover. Social work organizations need to foster employees' sense of calling to the field which improves the workplace outcomes.

Originality/value – This study is among those few empirical studies which help to validate the role of authentic leadership within social service organizations in China and shed light on understanding the underlying mechanisms through which authentic leaders affect organizational outcomes.

Keywords Authentic leadership, Sense of calling, Job satisfaction, Turnover intention, Social work organization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Retention of employees in social service agencies is a serious concern. In China, the annual turnover rates among social workers have exceeded the 20% alarm line of the industry (Zeng, 2023). China is building a huge social welfare system and social work as an important means for innovation in social governance to provide services to people in need plays an increasingly crucial role (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). The high turnover rate of social workers not only poses a major challenge to social work agencies but also impedes the growth of the social work industry. High employee turnover has grave implications for the quality, consistency, and stability of services provided to the people who use the services (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001).

Agitated by concerns over skills shortage and demographic trends, research in employee turnover in social work organizations has flourished during the two previous decades (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006; Park and Pierce, 2020). A large number of researchers focus on exploring the potential antecedents of employee turnover, and researchers suggest that leadership plays an important role in affecting turnover among child welfare, social work, and other human service employees (Katz *et al.*, 2022; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2014). For instance, Wilke *et al.* (2018) proposed a multi-level conceptual model to explore the influencing factors on child

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Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

welfare workforce turnover and identified leadership as one of the sub-categories of organizational influences. Mor Barak et al. (2001), in their meta-analytical research on antecedents to turnover among social workers, suggested that positive organizational conditions, including support from supervisors, are instrumental in worker retention. Recently, scholars have begun investigating authentic leadership and its effects as a root construct underlying all positive forms of leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders act in accordance with deep personal values and convictions, to build credibility and win the respect and trust of followers, and thereby lead in a manner that followers recognize as authentic (Avolio et al., 2004). Based on the social exchange theory, as the leadership process cascades to followers, they may also operate in a similar manner portraying to others their authenticity (Gardner et al., 2005). Accordingly, authentic leadership is believed playing a role in impacting followers' attitudes, behaviors, and performance. Related arguments suggest that authentic leadership makes a critical contribution to employee retention (Arasli et al., 2019; Ausar et al., 2016), but empirical evidence from the social work industry has been lacking, especially in the Chinese cultural context. As a leadership theory originated on Western cultural background, researchers are interested in cross-cultural applicability of authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2004; Li et al., 2014). As a result, the first objective of this study was to integrate the theories of authentic leadership and employee turnover in the context of social work organizations in Mainland China.

Although studies show that authentic leadership had a negative direct relationship with employee turnover (Arasli et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2022), attention to the influencing mechanism of authentic leadership on followers' turnover is still not enough. A review of the literature illustrates the importance of the critical mediators between these two variables. Porter and Steers (1973) demonstrated the sequential nature of turnover behavior and suggested taking into consideration the psychological factors in the withdrawal process. Avolio et al. (2004) developed a theoretical framework indicating the process linking authentic leadership to followers' attitudes and behaviors through a number of positive psychological outcomes. Sense of calling and job satisfaction are two psychological factors that influence staff turnover (Freund, 2005; Lee et al., 2022; Strand and Dore, 2009). Calling has historically been defined as a sense of destiny or prosocial obligation, while in more recent years, it refers to a sense of fulfillment or happiness (Duffy and Dik, 2013), and represents someone's deepest self-being associated with work (Chang et al., 2021). Job satisfaction refers to an attitude shaped by an assessment of a person's working experiences and condition (Weiss, 2002). According to Avolio et al. (2004), identification, positive emotions and job satisfaction are negatively related to followers' withdrawal behaviors. Although this model has been partially tested in some research (e.g. Walumbwa et al., 2008), it has not been fully studied, particularly in the social service context. Therefore, based on these earlier works, we adopted sense of calling and job satisfaction as two mediators between authentic leadership and social workers' turnover in a three-path mediation model.

Job turnover intent is an important retention variable associated with actual turnover rates among social workers (Mor Barak et al., 2006). Turnover intention is considered as the single strongest predictor of actual turnover across studies, suggesting that it is useful proxy for actual turnover (Alexander et al., 1998; Griffeth et al., 2000). Scholars suggested that employees experiencing job dissatisfaction would first express intention to quit before actually leaving (Gara Bach Ouerdian et al., 2021; Porter and Steers, 1973). Once employees have the intention to leave, they are more likely to be slack at work, in terms of being impatient, unproductive, and even conducting absenteeism behavior (Alilyyani et al., 2022). These attitudes and behaviors will be at a high risk to reducing organizational performance and effectiveness, as well as service quality. Therefore, in this study, we focus on examining social workers' turnover intention, through which their actual turnover can be predicted.

Meanwhile, we also further developed an integrated theory by testing this long mediation chain. According to the results based on data from 667 social workers from social work organizations in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai, China, authentic leadership has significant direct influences on employee job satisfaction and turnover intention, and at the same time, has a significant indirect effect on employee job satisfaction via the mediator of calling, as well as has a significant indirect effect influence on employee turnover intention via the mediators of both sense of calling and job satisfaction.

Overall, this study makes some contributes to the extant literature. First, our study reveals the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' turnover intentions among social workers in China's social work organizations, unlike most previous studies that typically focused on western cultures and in the business world. Besides, our analysis enables us to understand the influencing mechanisms that allow authentic leaders to exert their impacts on social workers' turnover intentions in China. The literature on the influencing mechanism of authentic leadership on employees' withdrawal behaviors is extensive, as numerous studies have found that authentic leadership affects followers' attitudes and behaviors through the influence on their psychological capacities like identification (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Fallatah *et al.*, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2018). Our study extends the extent literature by applying the model to the social work industry in China and introducing the concept of "sense of calling" to the field in the framework.

Theoretical background and research hypothesis
Social exchange theory
The social exchange theory is one of the most influential theoretical paradigms in understanding organizational behavior (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Social exchange theory indicates that reciprocity is the most fundamental norm based on which social exchange operates and the most basic form of human interactions (Blau, 1964). In the workplace, this theory speculates about interpersonal behaviors in terms of the exchange of costs and rewards: for instance, if employees perceive that they are treated favorably by leaders, they also show more positive attitude such as commitment, or more co-operative behavior like citizenship behavior to return the favorable leadership behavior (Herman *et al.*, 2013). Social exchange implies here that social workers perceive authentic leaders to exemplify high moral standards, integrity, and honesty and enhance their levels of trust and winningness to cooperate with the leader for the benefit of the organization in return (Avolio *et al.*, 2004). As a result, followers feel more encouraged and empowered to achieve positive follower outcomes including superior performance and extra effort and are less likely to conduct withdrawal behaviors including turnover. Therefore, based on the social exchange theory, it is conceivable that an employee who perceives leadership behaviors as authentic is more likely to exceed his/her formal duties by exhibiting behaviors from which the entire organization ultimately profits.

The background of Chinese context
Research on the authentic leadership effect has been conducted primarily in Western countries, while we still know little about it in Eastern contexts, such as China (Li *et al.*, 2014). Ausar *et al.* (2016) suggested that samples be obtained from collectivist societies for assessing the generalizability of the affective mechanisms linking authentic leadership and turnover intentions because their own findings generated from the individualist US culture may not be applicable to other cultural societies. Previous studied have conducted in South Korea which is also a collectivist society to examine the role authentic leadership in affecting employees' turnover intention (Kim *et al.*, 2022; Oh and Oh, 2017). However, in the context of China, which

is one of the representatives of collectivist societies, it has not been fully studied. It can be argued that the tenets of authentic leadership align with and are well supported by traditional Chinese culture (Whitehead and Brown, 2011). Confucianism, as the kernel of Chinese culture, plays a crucial role in shaping Chinese thinking and behaviors (Lin and Ho, 2009); its value is widely evident in contemporary Chinese management and leadership (Warner, 2010). For Confucians, in conformity with morality and virtue is the core principle governing social values and human beliefs (Cheung and Chan, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2012). People are encouraged to gain self-awareness through daily examination of their actions against moral principles, reflections on mistakes, and correction of wrong behaviors (Qiu *et al.*, 2019; Yang *et al.*, 2008). In addition, the collectivist orientation of the Chinese culture is highly compatible with authentic leadership values, such as overall goal orientation, altruistic care, and community consciousness (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, to the extent that Chinese people hold the traditional norms rooted in Confucian ideology, they attach great importance to hierarchy, respect for status and maintaining harmony (Yang *et al.*, 1989). With this hierarchical mindset, Chinese people tend to keep their distance from authority holders, and thus, employees with high traditionality are likely to be highly motivated and encouraged by authentic leaders whom they perceive as more approachable than expected (Lyu *et al.*, 2019).

In addition, social work practice needs leadership to set directions, goals, standards, and the vision of an organization, but leadership has been a missing ingredient in social work education and training (Holosko, 2009). The influence of authentic leaders extends to the greater society by tackling public policy issues and addressing organizational and societal problems (George, 2003). Therefore, authentic leadership is considered congruent with social work values and purposes in empowering people and advancing the greater good. Therefore, the current study was conducted in Mainland China to investigate the role of authentic leadership in impacting social workers' intentions to leave in the Chinese cultural context with a collectivist orientation.

Authentic leadership and turnover intention

Researchers have suggested that turnover intention is a vital factor in the modeling of employee turnover behavior and that behavioral intentions are the single best predictor of turnover (Abrams *et al.*, 1998; Griffeth *et al.*, 2000). Turnover intention is defined as the integrated performance of not being satisfied with the work, the idea of leaving, the intention of looking for other jobs, and the possibility of finding other work (Mobley *et al.*, 1979). Since the consistency and stability are critical for the quality of services provided to clients, it is necessary to reduce the turnover rate in social work organizations to deliver better high-quality social work services to people who use services and achieve high levels of client satisfaction (Johnco *et al.*, 2014; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2014). In addition, recent studies suggested that work environment factors, such as style of leadership, may influence the withdrawal behaviors of employees (Arasli and Arici, 2019; Wilke *et al.*, 2018). Avolio *et al.* (2004) recommended that authentic leadership plays a vital role in affecting employee withdrawal behaviors including turnover.

Authentic leadership is a values-based leadership that focuses on whether leadership is genuine and "real" (Gardner *et al.*, 2011; Northouse, 2012). Authenticity can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy and is reflected by the Greek aphorism "Know Thyself" and "To thine own self be true" (Harter, 2002). As these phrases indicate, the essence of authenticity is to know, accept, and remain genuine to oneself; the more people remain true to their core values, identities, preferences, and emotions, the more authentic they become (Erickson, 1994; Heidegger, 1962). Based on the concept of authenticity, authentic leadership is theorized in four dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, an internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). Self-awareness refers to the process

of reaching a deeper understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as desires and cognitions (Kernis, 2003; Zamahani *et al.*, 2011). Authentic leaders know themselves and have a clear sense of who they are and what they stand for; therefore, they have a strong anchor for their decisions and actions (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). Relational transparency refers to presenting one's authentic self to others by openly sharing his/her feelings and motives (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). Accordingly, authentic leaders tend to share their core feelings, motives, and inclinations with others in an appropriate manner (Kernis, 2003). Such behavior helps with trust building, cooperation and fostering teamwork (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). Internalized moral perspective describes that leader is guided by internal moral standards and values and acts according to these (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Therefore, authentic leaders have the ability to control over the extent to which they allow others to influence them. Others see leaders with an internalized moral perspective as authentic because their actions are consistent with their expressed beliefs and morals (Northouse, 2012). Finally, balanced processing refers to the quality of authentic leaders of avoiding favoritism and being unbiased (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). As a result, authentic leaders explore other people's opinion and solicit viewpoints from those who disagree with them and fully consider their positions before making a decision (Northouse, 2012). An authentic leader will listen to those who disagree with his/her opinions and does not enforce his/her point of view on others (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). As a result, authentic leadership expects positive follower outcomes as a consequence of the functions of the four factors (Gardner *et al.*, 2011).

The authentic leadership style can thus raise followers' identifications through producing a higher level of moral values, honesty, and integrity, and make them more likely to stay and strive in the name of the organization (Arici, 2018; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). In addition, previous studies in the social service context have identified emotional exhaustion as a major contributor to poor morale and subsequent turnover (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001). There is a strong emotional aspect in human service industry that does not exist to the same extent in the other industries (Peters, 2018). Particularly, social workers may enter into potentially unsafe and emotionally wrenching situations to work with fragile individuals, and thus are very likely to experience emotional exhaustion and even breakdown (Blome and Steib, 2014). Thereby, in the current social work organizations it becomes a key issue for leaders to foster employees' psychological capacity to help promote positive employee behaviors while prevent negative ones including turnover. Authentic leaders can promote employees' psychological capacities, enhance their engagement, motivation, commitment, and satisfaction to constantly improve their work outcomes and prevent them from leaving (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Kark and Shamir, 2002). The effect of authentic leadership in preventing turnover intention has been found in other high-demanding, labor-intensive industries such as nursing, hospitality, and tourism (Ausar *et al.*, 2016; Fallatah *et al.*, 2017; Laschinger and Fida, 2014). For instance, Hwang *et al.* (2022) suggested that authentic behaviors exemplified by nursing leaders would improve commitment and adjust satisfaction and frustration of basic psychological needs of nurses and eventually lower nurses' turnover intention. Based on data from South Korea's casino industry, Kim *et al.* (2022) proposed that authentic leadership has positive impacts on employee satisfaction which help prevents staff from leaving the position. Since a number of empirical studies have provided firm evidence of a strong correlation between authentic leadership and employee turnover intention, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Authentic leadership is negatively related to social workers' turnover intention.

Authentic leadership and followers' job satisfaction
Job satisfaction is defined as an attitude shaped by an assessment of a person's working experiences and condition (Weiss, 2002). Job dissatisfaction associated with negative employee behaviors and performance is a critical indicator of the deterioration of conditions

in any organization (Ayça, 2019). Moreover, in human service professions like social work and nursing, job satisfaction is a rather consistent predictor of turnover behavior (Lum *et al.*, 1998; Manlove and Guzell, 1997; Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006; Oktay, 1992; Siefert *et al.*, 1991). Meanwhile, prior studies have suggested that leadership is a crucial contextual factor that influences employees' work outcomes (Cummings *et al.*, 2010). Effective leadership from the management inspires positive work attitudes including job satisfaction (Belias and Koustelios, 2014; Fernandez, 2008). Moreover, authentic leadership emphasizes followers' strengths, encourages the sharing of different opinions for decision-making, and builds networks of collaborative relationships with followers, which all associated with follower job satisfaction (Blake *et al.*, 2012; Giallonardo *et al.*, 2010). Most important of all, as social workers are dedicated to promoting human well-being and social justice, authentic leaders, who desire to serve others through their leadership and are more interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), in social work organizations can motivate and inspire employees to provide better quality services, and thus enhance their satisfaction during work. In addition, in other human service industries which also rooted in humanistic and moral values like nursing, research has proven the positive relationship between authentic leadership and follower job satisfaction (Alilyyani *et al.*, 2018; Baek *et al.*, 2019). However, the effects of authentic leadership in social work organizations have been scarcely examined. Integrating these findings, in this study, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Authentic leadership is positively related to social workers' job satisfaction.

The mediating roles of sense of calling and job satisfaction

Although authentic leadership is important, it is not sufficient to achieve desired goals (Avolio *et al.*, 2004). Work as a calling seems an increasingly popular concept in the current milieu, given that feeling a career calling may be a prelude to success and well-being at work (Dalla Rosa *et al.*, 2017). Although no consensus definition exists of the term, a recent review by Dik and Duffy (2009) identify three components in conceptualizing the sense of calling: an external summons, indicating that an individual feels called to a specific type of work, an orientation toward work, implying the meaning and purpose people seek and receive from their work, and altruism; that is, individuals with a calling use their career to help others or advance the greater good. Therefore, sense of calling to a field involves a deep-seated excitement toward work and a sense of fulfilling one's life purpose in work (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Steger *et al.*, 2010). Studies have provided empirical support showing that workers acting on a sense of calling can exhibit lower levels of absenteeism, while higher job satisfaction (Duffy *et al.*, 2011; Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997).

In addition, the influence of authentic leaders extends well beyond bottom-line success, have a role to play in the greater society, aims to restore basic hope and meaningfulness of employees at work, and thus authentic leaders enable followers to feel energized and connected with their work consistent with their values and life-purpose (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008), which may stimulate employees to identify their work as a calling (Duffy and Dik, 2013; Fry, 2003). Most importantly, the major focus of the social work industry is to deliver high-quality services and promote social justice (Peters, 2018), and the sense of calling to the field may be positively influenced by the role model of an authentic leader and encourage people to stay to strive for the greater good out of altruism. Moreover, authentic leadership is considered to be the root concept of positive leadership styles and can incorporate other leadership styles including transformational leadership and spiritual leadership (Spitzmuller and Ilies, 2010). A number of studies provide empirical support for the existence of a positive relationship between perceived authentic leadership and calling. For instance, Gong *et al.* (2013) found a positive relationship between transformational leadership

and calling among special education teachers. Chang *et al.* (2021) indicated that spiritual leadership positively affects followers' calling through vision, hope, and altruistic love, spiritual survival, and goal identification. However, no study has provided empirical evidence showing the relationship between authentic leadership and sense of calling, especially in the social work industry.

Moreover, the relationship between sense of calling and job satisfaction is among the most studied in the literature on calling (Dalla Rosa *et al.*, 2017). A greater endorsement of a calling among employees associates with favorable work outcomes including job satisfaction (Duffy and Sedlacek, 2007). Most important of all, when social workers believe they are destined to do their work and are motivated to pursue their calling with regard to providing high-quality services to people in need and to promote social justice, they can thus be more motivated and empowered at work and so should have lower intentions to leave their job (Dalla Rosa *et al.*, 2021). A number of studies provide empirical support for the idea that employees' sense of calling is positively related to their work satisfaction. Duffy *et al.* (2011) suggested that calling may lead to job satisfaction because of having a greater commitment to one's career. Bunderson and Thompson (2009) indicated that the presence of a calling may increase work meaning, which, in turn, could lead to greater work satisfaction. Moreover, Peterson *et al.* (2009) found that calling was strongly correlated with job satisfaction. Peng *et al.* (2020) found the direct effect of career calling on job satisfaction through the sample of 355 male army officers in China. However, no studies examining the relationship between calling and job satisfaction have been conducted in the context of social work.

Overall, both sense of calling as a psychological construct and job satisfaction as a work attitude operate in the process of which authentic leadership affects followers' behaviors (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Duffy *et al.*, 2012). According to Luthans and Avolio (2003), authentic leader's core challenge is to identify followers' strengths and help build them appropriately, while linking them to an organizational mission. Therefore, although authentic leadership can directly affect followers' attitudes and behaviors, such influence is made more powerful and motivational through follower self-identities and positive emotions, and in turn their working self-concepts (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Lord and Brown, 2004). Specifically, Avolio *et al.* (2004) developed a conceptual model explaining the underlying mechanism of which authentic leadership influences followers' behaviors. The model demonstrates that authentic leaders affect followers' work attitudes through the psychological process of identification and positive emotions and thus impact their behaviors including withdrawal behaviors. Meanwhile, previous scholars have identified identification as an important component of calling (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Hagmaier and Abele, 2012). Steger *et al.* (2010) stated that calling represents one's deepest self-being associated with work. In addition, calling is also considered as a sense of fulfillment or happiness (Duffy *et al.*, 2011). Most importantly, as the nature of social work is interacting with highly vulnerable people, the practitioners have a high risk to experience work-related burnout and psychological breakdown, and thus the psychological capacity of calling and the positive work attitude of job satisfaction prevent them from leaving and boost the delivery of high-quality services under the condition of having stable and consistent staff members.

Integrating these findings, supervisors who adopt an authentic leadership style could positively influence their employees' job satisfaction through their sense of calling to the field, and positively influence their employees' turnover intention through their sense of calling and job satisfaction. Most important of all, these earlier studies demonstrate that employees' sense of calling has a mediating role between the independent variable of authentic leadership and the dependent outcome variable of employee job satisfaction, while sense of calling and job satisfaction both have mediating roles between authentic leadership and employee turnover intention. This study examines the three-path mediation model in the social work context in China. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3. Social workers' sense of calling mediates the effect of authentic leadership on social workers' job satisfaction.

H4. Social workers sense of calling and job satisfaction mediate the effect of authentic leadership on social workers' turnover intention.

The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1.

Method

Participants and procedures

The data collection for this study was conducted in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai in Mainland China, from October 2021 to January 2022. These three cities were purposely selected due to their peculiar role in the development of the social work profession in China. Their geographic location and level of economic advancement were crucial reasons for this peculiarity. The geographical proximity of Shenzhen and Guangzhou to Hong Kong makes them fertile grounds for the collision and growth of professional and indigenized social work, and Shanghai has a long history in the development of social work education and practice. Therefore, these cities can represent the most well-developed social work practice and have the largest number of social work organizations comparing to other cities in China. Meanwhile, these cities also reported high rate of turnover (Du, 2021; Wang *et al.* 2022). Moreover, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai were selected as the sampling sites for the present study due to their information transparency. They have an abundance of information from registered social service organizations that is accessible to the public.

Multistage cluster sampling method was applied in the process of data collection at the first stage. Fifteen administrative districts were extracted from lists obtained from the Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai governments (5 districts in each city). In each district, two social work organizations were randomly selected based on the organization lists obtained from governments' social organization platforms. The inclusion criteria of selected social work organizations are those founded at least one year and had direct services provided. We communicated with organization leaders, top or middle level managers or HR managers of selected organizations through email or phone call based on the information published online and invited their employees to attend the survey. Eventually, seven organizations in Guangzhou, eight organizations in Shenzhen and two organizations in Shanghai replied and agreed to attend the survey. Before the formal survey, participants were asked to confirm their willingness to participate in this investigation. In addition, in order to avoid the common method bias, we inform the participants in the beginning that the survey was anonymous, and the results will be used for academic purpose solely to protecting respondent anonymity and reducing evaluation apprehension (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). In addition, we also used reversed items in the questionnaire to reduce response bias. At this stage, 1,007 social workers from 17 social work organizations participated in the survey, and 721 social workers completed and submitted the questionnaire. After eliminating invalid responses, 592 questionnaires were eventually identified as valid responses. Because this
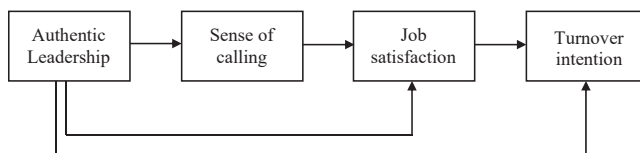
Figure 1.
Hypothesized model

Source(s): Authors work

amount of number was less than the expected sample size and might be insufficient for the current analysis, availability sampling was then used as a complementary sampling method to collect more data.

At the availability sampling stage, we used our social networks, including professors, classmates, and former colleagues, to contact accessible social work organizations that fulfilled the study's requirements to make up for the institutions that did not reply to or rejected the invitation to participate in the survey. Three more social work agencies in Guangzhou and another two in Shenzhen were invited to participate in the survey. However, in Shanghai, we only successfully gained access to another three social work organizations. At this stage, 161 social workers from 8 organizations were invited to attend the survey, of whom 105 completed and submitted the questionnaire. After eliminating invalid responses, 75 questionnaires were eventually identified as valid responses.

Overall, the current study sent the questionnaire to 1,168 social workers from 26 social work organizations using two sampling methods—multistage cluster sampling and availability sampling—and, ultimately, a total of 826 social workers agreed to participate in the survey, resulting in a response rate of 70.7% and 667 of them were identified as valid responses. The majority of social workers were in their 20s or 30s and had 1–5 years of work experience in the social work field; about 56% had a bachelor's degree or above, 39% had a junior college or a vocational college degree, and 5% had only a high school or a technical secondary school degree. During the entire process, ethical standards were strictly followed, and approval was procured from the Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee.

Measures

All variables included in this research were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale from 1, "strongly disagree," to 5, "strongly agree." The precise measures are described below, along with the results of the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for variable measurement.

Authentic leadership. Employees' perception of authentic leadership was measured by 15 items on 4 dimensions of perceived authentic leadership adapted from Walumbwa *et al.*'s (2008) authentic leadership scale. The measurement used in this study was the Chinese version of Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) (Li *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2020). The dimension of relational transparency included 4 items; internalized moral perspective included 3 items; balanced processing included 3 items; and self-awareness contained 4 items. Sample items include "My supervisor can truthfully express his/her views", "My supervisor encourages everyone to express their thoughts", and "My supervisor makes decisions based on his/her moral principles". The scale has been demonstrated high validity and reliability in the previous study conducted in China (Li *et al.*, 2016). The reliability of the scale in this study was 0.905.

Sense of calling. Individual's calling to a specific profession was measured using the four-item scale developed by Hall (1968) and Snizek (1972). The scale has been validated in the Chinese context among clinical nurses (Chen *et al.*, 2019). Sample items include "I feel people in this profession have a real "calling" for their work," and "It is encouraging to see the high level of idealism which is maintained by people in this field." The reliability of the scale in this study was 0.915, indicating high internal consistency.

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured using the four-item scale developed and validated by Quinn and Staines (1979). The index measures an employee's general affective reaction to the job without reference to any specific work facet (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006). The reliability of the scale in the current study was 0.827, indicating high internal consistency.

Turnover intention. Turnover intention was measured using five items adapted from Auerbach *et al.* (2014) as well as Moynihan and Pandey (2008), indicating social workers' intentions to leave their organization. Participants answered questions including "I once had

the idea of leaving this organization", "I cannot see any personal development in his organization", "In the next few months I intend to leave this organization", "In the few years I intend to leave this organization", and "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization". The reliability of the scale in the current study was 0.849, indicating high internal consistency.

Control variables. Because prior research has suggested that age, education, gender, and tenure with the organization to be significant predictors of turnover (Blankertz and Robinson, 1996; Jinnett and Alexander, 1999; Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001), we included these four variables as control variables). The coding schemata for the control variables are presented in Table 1.

Analytical strategy
Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients are calculated as preliminary analyses in SPSS 24.0. Structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS 24.0 was used to test the hypothesized model. In this analysis, we adopted Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step strategy to test the hypothesized model. First, the measurement model was confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and then SEM analysis was performed to measure the fit and path coefficients of the hypothesized model. Multiple fit indices are used to determine the model fit to the data: chi-square (χ^2) statistics, comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The smaller χ^2 indicates a higher fit of the model (Bollen, 1989). However, χ^2 is not prioritized for large samples due to its sensitivity to sample size (Byrne, 2001). In addition, CFI, IFI, and TLI above 0.90 as well as RMSEA below 0.08 suggest an acceptable fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2015). Moreover, for the structural modeling including direct, indirect, and total effects within the theoretical model would be assessed by bootstrapping methods (2,000 iterations for the present study) using 95% confidence intervals. The effects are considered significant if there is not "zero" value between the upper and lower bounds of the confidence intervals (Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Results
Descriptive analysis and preliminary analysis
Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations of the variables. Authentic leadership is positively correlated with sense of calling and job satisfaction, while is negatively correlated with employee turnover intention. Moreover, sense of calling is positively correlated with job satisfaction while negatively correlated with turnover intention.

In addition, in order to examine the multivariate normality, skewness, and kurtosis were conducted and the values of all the variables in this study were within acceptable ranges of ±2 (range from −1.568 to 1.038) (Kim, 2013; Miles and Shevlin, 2001). Moreover, the study examined variance inflation factors (VIF) to assess the likelihood that multicollinearity affects the results. The statistics of all the predictors (VIFs <2.00) indicated that multicollinearity is not a concern in this study (Adeboye *et al.*, 2014).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)
To measure the internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the constructs in our proposed model, we performed CFA analysis on the five constructs of authentic leadership, social workers' sense of calling to the field, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. The results revealed that the composite reliability (CR) of each construct ranged from 0.842 to 0.916, exceeding the 0.60 CR threshold value, and giving evidence of internal consistency reliability (Bagozzi and Yi, 1989). In addition, the factor loadings of the individual

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age[a]	1.418	0.580	–							
2. Gender[b]	0.808	0.394	−0.010	–						
3. Work experience[c]	1.952	0.872	0.440**	0.008	–					
4. Education[d]	2.514	0.586	−0.029	−0.001	0.095*	–				
5. Authentic leadership	3.864	0.603	0.077*	−0.039	−0.007	−0.048	–			
6. Sense of calling	3.584	0.809	0.079*	−0.012	0.012	−0.144**	0.411**			
7. Job satisfaction	3.818	0.642	0.138**	−0.024	0.080*	−0.115**	0.464**	0.539**		
8. Turnover intention	2.875	0.896	−0.182**	−0.066	−0.083*	0.077*	−0.399**	−0.334**	−0.525**	

Note(s): Two-tailed tests; $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$
[a] Age of social workers was coded: 1 = <30 years, 2 = 30–40 years, 3 = >40 years
[b] Gender of social workers was coded: 0 = Male, 1 = Female
[c] Work experience = length of time in years that the social worker has worked in the social work field. It was coded: 1 = <2 years, 2 = 2–5 years, 3 = 6–10 years, 4 = >10 years
[d] Education level of social workers was coded: 1 = High school or Technical secondary school, 2 = Junior or Vocational college, 3 = Bachelor's degree or above
Source(s): Authors work

items in the 4-factor model were all significant, ranged from 0.617 to 0.891 (all $p < 0.001$), indicating preliminary evidence for the convergent validity of the measurement model. Meanwhile, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs ranged from 0.535 to 0.731, exceeding the 0.50 AVE cut-off value (Bagozzi and Yi, 1989), and thus the convergent validity was acceptable. Moreover, the estimated intercorrelations among all constructs were less than the square roots of the AVE in each construct, and this provides preliminary support for discriminant validity (Hair *et al.*, 2006). The hypothesized 4-factor model (i.e. with items loading onto their corresponding factors of authentic leadership, sense of calling, job satisfaction, and turnover intention) yields a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(112) = 298.959$, TLI $= 0.967$, CFI $= 0.972$, IFI $= 0.973$, RMSEA $= 0.050$), which provides more satisfactory fit indices compared to the 3-factor models, the 2-factor model, and the 1-factor model (see Table 2). Most importantly, the differences in χ^2 between the 4-factor model and alternative models were significant (all $p < 0.001$), and these provide evidence of the discriminant validity, and reduce the potential influences of common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, we can conclude that the 4-factor model (i.e. the proposed model) is the best to examine the different characteristics of the four constructs considered in this work.

Test of structural model
The structural modeling results indicate that the hypothesized model fit the data well: $\chi^2(164) = 372.830$, CFI $= 0.970$, IFI $= 0.970$, TLI $= 0.962$, RMSEA $= 0.044$. Tables 3 and 4 present the results on detail while Figure 2 shows the standardized path coefficients among the key variables in the SEM.

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA
4-factor model	298.959	112	2.669	–	0.972	0.973	0.967	0.050
3-factor model 1	1723.054	115	14.983	1424.095***(3)[a]	0.763	0.764	0.720	0.145
3-factor model 2	1006.526	115	8.752	707.567***(3)[a]	0.869	0.869	0.845	0.108
3-factor model 3	874.541	115	7.605	575.582***(3)[a]	0.888	0.889	0.868	0.100
2-factor model	2020.861	117	17.272	1721.902***(5)[a]	0.720	0.721	0.674	0.156
1-factor model	3094.352	118	26.223	2795.393***(6)[a]	0.562	0.563	0.495	0.195

Note(s): ***$p < 0.001$
4-factor model: The measurement model; 3-factor model 1: Authentic leadership + Sense of calling, Job satisfaction, Turnover intention; 3-factor model 2: Authentic leadership, Sense of calling + Job satisfaction, Turnover intention; 3-factor model 3: Authentic leadership, Sense of calling, Job satisfaction + Turnover intention; 2-factor model: Authentic leadership, Sense of calling + Job satisfaction, Turnover intention
[a] Model was compared with the measurement model
Source(s): Authors work

Table 2.
Confirmatory factor analysis results ($n = 667$)

	Estimate	β	S.E.	C.R.	P
Authentic leadership→Sense of calling	0.638	0.434	0.060	10.687	***
Authentlc leadership→Job satisfaction	0.271	0.334	0.035	7.716	***
Authentic leadership→Turnover intention	−0.307	−0.184	0.074	−4.149	***
Sense of calling→Job satisfaction	0.233	0.422	0.025	9.330	***
Job satisfaction→Turnover intention	−1.035	−0.505	0.111	−9.298	***

Note(s): ***$p < 0.001$. Estimate: unstandardized path coefficient. For clear presentation, the coefficients of covariates were not listed in the table
Abbreviations: β, standardized path coefficient; C.R., critical ratio; S.E., standard error
Source(s): Authors work

Table 3.
Unstandardized and standardized path coefficients of the structural model ($n = 667$)

	Point estimate	Product of coefficients SE	Z	Percentile 95% CI Lower	Upper	Bootstrapping Bias-corrected percentile 95% CI Lower	Upper	Two-tailed significance
Standardized direct effects								
Authentic leadership→Calling	0.434	0.042	10.333	0.353	0.518	0.344	0.507	0.001**
Authentic leadership→Job satisfaction	0.334	0.045	7.422	0.244	0.426	0.245	0.426	0.001**
Authentic leadership→Turnover intention	−0.184	0.048	−3.833	−0.277	−0.088	−0.274	−0.084	0.001**
Sense of calling→Job satisfaction	0.422	0.043	9.814	0.333	0.504	0.331	0.502	0.001**
Job satisfaction→Turnover intention	−0.505	0.050	−10.100	−0.601	−0.404	−0.602	−0.405	0.001**
Standardized indirect effects								
Authentic leadership→Job satisfaction	0.149	0.024	6.208	0.107	0.199	0.108	0.200	0.001**
Authentic leadership→Turnover intention	−0.154	0.027	−5.704	−0.213	−0.104	−0.216	−0.107	0.001**
Standardized total effects								
Authentic leadership→Job satisfaction	0.517	0.039	13.256	0.441	0.539	0.440	0.502	0.001**
Authentic leadership→Turnover intention	−0.445	0.037	−12.027	−0.515	−0.369	−0.510	−0.160	0.001**

Note(s): Standardized estimating of 2,000 bootstrap sample; **$p < 0.01$
Source(s): Authors work
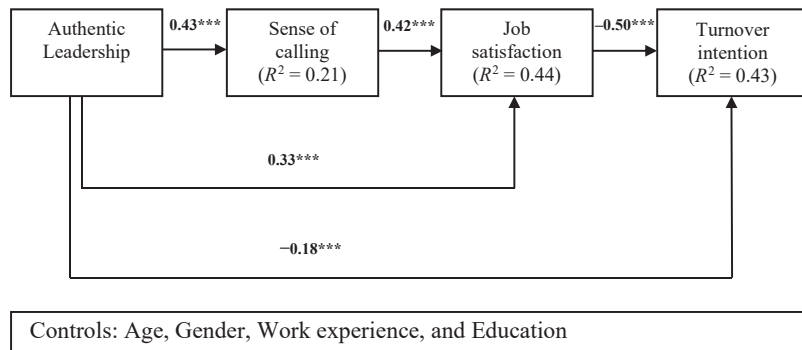
Figure 2.
Standardized
coefficients for the
SEM model

Controls: Age, Gender, Work experience, and Education

Note(s): ***$p < 0.001$

Source(s): Authors work

As shown in Table 3, the results of the direct effect of authentic leadership on sense of calling ($\beta = 0.434$, $p < 0.001$), job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$), and turnover intention ($\beta = -0.184$, $p < 0.001$), the direct effect of sense of calling on job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.422$, $p < 0.001$), and the direct effect of job satisfaction on turnover intention ($\beta = -0.505$, $p < 0.001$) were all statistically significant. Therefore, H1 and H2 were supported.

Among all the covariates, age is significantly related to turnover intention ($\beta = -0.127$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that older people are less likely to quit. Gender is significantly associated with turnover intention ($\beta = -0.082$, $p = 0.015$), suggesting that men are more likely to quit than women in social work organizations. In addition, education is significantly related to sense of calling ($\beta = -0.124$, $p < 0.001$) which decreases as employees have higher educational level.

In order to investigate the indirect effects of the dependent variables through the mediators, we performed percentile bootstrapping and bias-corrected percentile bootstrapping at a 95% confidence interval with 2,000 bootstrap samples (Taylor *et al.*, 2008). As shown in Table 4, the results of the bootstrap test confirmed the existence of a positive and significant mediating effect for sense of calling between authentic leadership and job satisfaction ($b = 0.149$, $p = 0.001$), and negative and significant mediating effects for sense of calling and job satisfaction between authentic leadership and turnover intention ($b = -0.154$, $p = 0.001$). Therefore, H3 and H4 were both supported, suggesting that the increase of leader authenticity help constructs followers' psychology of considering work as a sense of calling after controlling for some sociodemographic factors (Duffy and Dik, 2013) and such calling can promote follower job satisfaction which in turn prevents employee turnover. Overall, sense of calling and job satisfaction mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and social workers' intention to leave, accounting for 43% of the variance.

Discussion

This study focuses on a particular human service profession which plays increasingly important role in social governance in the current China. Furthermore, it investigates the effect of leadership on employee withdrawal behaviors in this industry at a time of particular need such as the increasing demand for professional social work practitioners nationwide in the recent years (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Based on the sample of 667 social workers from 26 social work organizations in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai in Mainland China, this study investigated the relationship between authentic leadership and employee turnover, as well as

the underlying mechanisms that allow authentic leaders to exert their influences on followers' turnover intentions in the context of social work organizations in Mainland China. Authentic leadership is proposed to be directly related to social workers' turnover intention and indirectly mediated through sense of calling and job satisfaction. The findings supply empirical evidence supporting the proposed theoretical framework in this study.

One of the key findings in this study was that authentic leadership had a negative and direct effect on social workers' turnover intentions in the context of China. This finding supports our first research hypothesis. The findings are consistent with the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and various empirical studies on employee turnover carried out in Western countries (Arici, 2018; Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008; Wong and Laschinger, 2013), indicating that supportive and empowered leadership can motivate followers to conduct positive behaviors as a reciprocity of positive leader behaviors while prevent negative ones (Arasli and Arici, 2019; Laschinger *et al.*, 2012). There is some debate, however, about whether the relationship between authentic leadership and turnover intention is direct or indirect via authentic leadership's impact on other variables, particularly psychological factors. Several authors find that authentic leadership leads to turnover intention through its effects on certain mediating variables. Oh and Oh (2017), for instance, found that authentic leadership influences turnover intention through affective commitment. Fallatah *et al.* (2017) found that authentic leadership affects new nurses' turnover intentions through personal and organizational identification as well as self-efficacy. Moreover, based on the data sampled from the hospitality industry, Ausar *et al.* (2016) found that authentic leadership affects employees' turnover intentions through organizational commitment but found no significant direct relationship between authentic leadership and turnover intention. Our results indicate that authentic leaders who desire to serve others through their leadership and are interested in empowering the people they lead are instrumental in worker retention (Johnco *et al.*, 2014; Zeitlin *et al.*, 2014).

The second key finding was that authentic leadership affects social workers' intentions to leave through the influences on their sense of calling to the field and job satisfaction. This supports our second, third and fourth research hypotheses. Congruent with the sequential models of turnover research (Porter and Steers, 1973), our findings suggest that employees who perceive higher level of authentic leadership in social work organizations are more likely to identify their work as calling, which promotes their satisfaction at work, and thus prevents them from having the intentions to leave. The results are consistent with previous research indicating that although authentic leadership is important, it is not sufficient to achieve desired goals and the influence of authentic leadership is made more powerful through psychological factors (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Ilies *et al.*, 2005). A number of studies have investigated the influencing mechanisms of authentic leadership on followers' behaviors. Olaniyan and Hystad (2016) found that authentic leadership affects followers' job satisfaction, job insecurity and intentions to quit through psychological captain. Based on Avolio *et al.*'s (2004) model, Liu *et al.* (2018) found that authentic leadership affects employees' workplace deviation behavior through mediation effects of three psychological factors, including supervisor identification, psychological safety, and job engagement. Our results indicate the important role of psychological issues in resulting negative follower behavior as well as the crucial role of authentic leadership in preventing these negative attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, authentic leadership plays an extremely vital role in social work since social workers are often at a higher risk to face emotionally wrenching situations, and thus are more likely to experience psychological issues than others (Gellis, 2001; Peters, 2018). Authentic leaders can provide social workers with needed support to promote their psychological capacity, and thus prevent their intention to leave. In addition, the current study examined a new variable beyond the existing theoretical nomological network of authentic leadership suggested by Avolio *et al.* (2004). We identified that sense

of calling, as a psychological construct, together with employees' job satisfaction, mediate the effects of authentic leadership on social workers' turnover intentions in China.

Theoretical contributions

This study makes some contributions to the leadership and social work organization management literature. First of all, we developed and examined a model that illustrate the influencing mechanism of authentic leadership on social workers' intentions to leave. Although a number of past studies have reviewed the relationship between authentic leadership and employee turnover intention (e.g. Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Laschinger and Fida, 2014; Olaniyan and Hystad, 2016; Wong and Laschinger, 2013), this is the first to investigate the direct and indirect effects of leaders' authentic behaviors on individual turnover intention in a social work context. Since social work organizations require stable and consistent staff to deliver high quality services and maintain organizations' sustainable development (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2006), the main contribution of this work is thus this model, which has a strong theoretical foundation and can be used to assess the influences of authentic leadership on employees' withdrawal behaviors based on social work industry data in the Mainland China. Second, research on the authentic leadership effect has been conducted primarily in Western countries (Li *et al.*, 2014). Our study should add to the very recent body of authentic leadership in the Chinese cultural context. By using the sample data from China, the findings also respond to the call for assessing the generalizability of the affective mechanisms linking authentic leadership to turnover intentions to collectivist societies (Ausar *et al.*, 2016). Our research was conducted in China, which is one of the representative nations that have a collectivistic orientation (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Our research will offer new insights on authentic leadership and turnover among social workers in China and, subsequently, has paved the way for further investigation relevant to this region.

Practical implications

Actual turnover begins with the intention to leave the position, and the prevention of turnover intention plays a vital role in preventing actual turnover (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000). Since high turnover rate can prevent social work organizations from obtaining and maintaining competitive advantages, and work environment factors, such as styles of leadership, are regarded as antecedents of employees' turnover intention (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001, 2006), it is important for practitioners to learn more about any relationships that may exist between leadership and employee turnover intention. We thus suggest that social work organizations should make more efforts to train their supervisors and encourage them to improve their authentic relationships with their followers. With a greater awareness of this, supervisors should be better able to detect the direct and indirect influences of authentic leadership in the psychological processes that relate to employees' turnover intentions (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Moreover, to foster, accelerate, and reinforce authentic leadership behaviors, organizations could offer authentic leadership development programs to their managers since authentic leadership is a process that can be developed over time (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). By training supervisors to utilize authentic leadership, social work organizations could prevent their employees from having the intention to leave by increasing their sense of calling to the social work field, as well as their job satisfaction. Since the social work industry is labor intensive, employees' feelings of work as a calling and job satisfaction can not only improve service quality, as well as client satisfaction and trust, but also promote the sustainable development of the profession. In addition, potential authentic leaders can be identified earlier during the recruitment and selection process by employing psychometrically valid measures that gauge one's likelihood to exemplify authentic leadership behaviors (Eva *et al.*, 2021). Specifically speaking, the four components

of authentic leadership (self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency) can be developed in organizational leadership to increase ethical organizational behavior, as well as be used to identify potential authentic leaders.

Limitations and future directions
Although this study contributes to the knowledge system, it has some limitations that can serve as the direction of future explorations. To begin with, there are some limitations regarding to the study design. Firstly, the main limitation of our study design is the use of cross-sectional data. The primary limitation of the cross-sectional study design is that because the exposure and outcome are simultaneously assessed, there is generally no evidence of a temporal relationship between exposure and outcome. Without longitudinal data, it is not possible to establish a true cause and effect relationship. In addition, time gaps between variables play a vital role in examining dual mediators by establishing causal relationships. However, the cross-sectional study design is a main limitation for understanding the underlying causal mechanisms and determining the nature of the mediation process. In the future, we might conduct a follow-up study using longitudinal data to provide evidence supports for causality among authentic leadership, sense of calling, job satisfaction and turnover intention in social work organizations. Besides, our data were collected from social workers' self-reports, raising the possibility of CMV. Although some procedure remedies have done in the data collection process, and the CFA results on the influence of CMV alleviates some of this concern, future research might benefit from other methodological precautions, such as collecting data from different sources or separate the measurement of the predictor and criterion variables (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). In addition, future research may need to find more factors which may moderates the relationship between authentic leadership and employees' turnover intentions. For instance, some organizational factors such as the organization size and the managerial orientation in social work organizations may play a role in affecting the influence of authentic leadership on social workers' withdrawal behaviors (Oh and Oh, 2017). Moreover, cultural value or orientation may also impact the power of authentic leadership in affecting follower outcomes (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Future research may also need to investigate the role of authentic leadership in affecting social workers' turnover from different cultural context to examine the cross-cultural applicability and differences of authentic leadership in the social work industry.

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Further reading

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