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A Review of Existing Turnover Intention Theories

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***Abstract*—**Existing turnover intention theories are reviewed in this paper. This review was conducted with the help of the search keyword "turnover intention theories" in Google Scholar during the month of July 2017. These theories include: The Theory of Organizational Equilibrium (TOE), Social Exchange Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, the Resource-Based View, Equity Theory, Human Capital Theory, and the Expectancy Theory. One of the limitations of this review paper is that data were only collected from Google Scholar where many papers were sometimes not freely accessible. However, this paper attempts to contribute to the research in clarifying the distinction between theories and models in the context of turnover intention.

***Keywords*—** Job embeddedness theory, theory of organizational equilibrium (TOE), Herzberg's two-factor theory, turnover intention theories, theories and models.

I. Introduction

THIS section briefly introduces the concept of turnover, prior to the presentation of the concept of turnover intention.

A. The Concept of Turnover

Employee turnover is of growing concerns to organizations and it is not surprising that it has attracted the attention of many scholars [1]. In fact, the first empirical study on labor turnover dates from 1925 [1]. The term employee turnover refers to the situation where an employee ceases to be a member of an organization. Various scholars have provided similar definitions of the term. For [2], as cited by [3], employee turnover is defined as the "entrance of new employees into the organisation and the departure of existing employees from the organisation". Reference [4] describes turnover as the change in the workforce during a definite time period. For [5], turnover refers to the "permanent movement (of an employee) beyond the boundary of the organization". According to [6], as cited by [7], employee turnover can be classified into three different categories, namely unavoidable turnover, desirable turnover and undesirable turnover. Unavoidable turnover may occur due to retirement, sickness or family matters. Desirable turnover applies to incompetent employees, as opposed to undesirable turnover which occurs when talented, skilled and competent employees leave the organisation against the will of their employers [7].

Scholars have also classified turnover as voluntary or involuntary. Reference [8], as cited by [9], defines involuntary turnover as the permanent release of a worker from his or her employment due to numerous possible reasons. For Reference [10], involuntary turnover is an "instance of discharge that reflects an employer's decision to terminate the employment relationship". In contrast, voluntary turnover is an employee's decision to leave the organisation at her or his own will [11]. People decide to willingly leave an organisation for countless reasons, including poor compensation, job stress, poor performance appraisal, lack of job satisfaction, lack of career advancement opportunities, lack of organisational commitment, lack of autonomy and unfair labor practices [12] (as cited by [4], [9], [13]).

Although there is a plethora of research on actual turnover, it is still a challenge for organisations to determine its real causes in order to reduce its high propensity. Hence, various scholars agree with [14] that studying turnover intentions will yield more accurate results to understand the actual causes of turnover [4], [15]-[18]. However, the attitude of employees and their behavior prior to their decision to quit their job is dependent on various control variables. Therefore, [19] suggests that the concept of voluntary turnover should be elucidated as a blend of social, economic and psychological processes. This implies that, in order to understand one's intention to leave the job, the underlying social, economic and psychological factors should also be factored in. People usually decide to quit their jobs after careful thoughts. They assess their situation, they weight different options, they look for opportunities and they ponder their feelings. Thus, [20], as cited by [21], asserts that the decision to quit a job is not usually taken lightly, but it is the result of a thorough and elaborate process. Reference [22], as cited by [23], claims that employees initiate the process of terminating their employment only when they desire to do so and when they think that their move will be easy. Consequently, employees' eagerness to terminate their employment is generally synonymous with their turnover intention [23].

B. The Concept of Turnover Intention

Contrary to actual turnover, turnover intention is ambiguous. It reflects the attitude that an employee has towards the organization. One will concur with [24] that attitudes are very complex, and therefore several fundamental components must be considered in order to understand them. According to [25], as cited by [26], "intentions are a statement about a specific behavior of interest". As per [27], intentions generally signal an accurate indication of the subsequent behavior. Thus, [28], as cited by [29], claims that it is important to study intentions because they can give useful indications on one's perceptions and judgements.

The terms turnover intention, turnover intent, intention to leave and intention to quit, are used synonymously in the literature to describe the likelihood that an employee will quit his or her job in the near future. Reference [30] defines

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turnover intention as "the conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization". For [31], it is "the (subjective) probability that an individual will change the job within a certain time period". As per [32], turnover intention is "the extent to which an employee plans to leave the organization". According to [33], as cited by [5], turnover intention refers to the following three elements of the withdrawal cognition process: Firstly, the thought of quitting the job; then the intention to search for a different job; and finally, the intention to quit ([5], [28]).

Psychological research claims that there is a positive relationship between turnover intention and actual turnover [34]. In fact, many scholars assert that intention to leave is one of the main and immediate precursors of employee turnover [18], [35]-[37], and actual turnover positively increases with turnover intention [4], [26]. Consequently, gauging employees' turnover intentions might help in the determination of their propensity to leave the organization. In fact, according to [28] as cited by [5], employees go through the following three stages before deciding to leave an organization: firstly, they think of leaving the organization; then they intend to look for another job; and thereafter follows their intention to quit.

II. Problem Statement

The plethora of contemporary literature on voluntary turnover clearly shows that it is a growing concern for organizations as it usually signals the loss of the most talented and skilled employees. In fact, [15] as cited by [18], claims that high levels of turnover are a curse for institutions, and are destructive and detrimental for both the organization and the employee. Many scholars also claim that turnover leads to the loss of a valuable financial and social capital [38], [39]; it affects the morale of the remaining workforce; as well as the reputation of the organization [38], [40]. Likewise, [21] points out that turnover disrupts teamwork and causes serious delays for important projects in situations where it involves members who are playing a key role within a project team. Reference [41] also highlights the negative effect of turnover on employee commitment and on staff morale.

III. Aim and Rationale

The aim of this study is to present the main theories supporting existing research on turnover intentions. This is a dissimilarity compared to previous literature review papers where the description of these theories is either absent, or is mixed with the presentation of existing turnover intention models. Some of these previous review papers include [1], [42], [43]. Reference [42] is a review of existing literature on the different factors affecting employee turnover; the effects of turnover; as well as the different strategies for its minimization, but it does not review existing turnover intention theories. As for [1] and [43], their reviews include both turnover intention theories and turnover intention models, but it is difficult to differentiate existing turnover intention theories from the existing turnover models in these previous literature review papers. It is worth noting that these difficulties in distinguishing models from theories are well documented in the existing literature, as indicated by the following quote from [44]: "Models are closely related to theory and the difference between a theory and a model is not always clear". Hence, the purpose of this paper is to elucidate the contrast between theories and models in the context of turnover intention.

IV. Research Methodology

The findings of this study were obtained from a review of existing literature on turnover intentions. This literature review was conducted on Google Scholar during July 2017 with the help of the search keyword "turnover intention theories".

V. Research Findings

Eight theories are presented in this section: the Expectancy Theory, Human Capital Theory, Equity Theory, the Resource-Based View, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and the Theory of Organizational Equilibrium (TOE). These theories were selected from many sources, including [45], [46].

A. The Theory of Organizational Equilibrium (TOE)

The Theory of Organizational Equilibrium (TOE) is presented by [22] and it insists on the need to balance employees' contributions and inducements with those of the organization [43]. The Theory of Organization Equilibrium is commonly considered as the first formal theory on turnover intention [43]. This theory owes its name to the fact that it hypothesizes that turnover is a decision taken after weighing one's perception of one's contribution to the organization against one's perception of the contribution of the organization to one's life ([22] as cited by [47], [48]). This theory assumes that perceived desirability of movement and perceived ease of movement are the two main factors that determine an employee's equilibrium. These two main factors also determine job satisfaction, which itself directly affects turnover intention [43]. According to TOE, job satisfaction mainly depends on one's compatibility with one's different roles at the workplace; on the predictability of his or her relationships at work; and on the conformity of one's job with one's self-image [43], [48]. It is worth pointing out that this model contains a loop between turnover, organization size, possibility of transfer and perceived desirability of movement. In other words, according to TOE, turnover affects the size of the organization, the size of the organization affects the possibility of transfer, the possibility of transfer affects the perceived desirability of movement, the perceived desirability of movement affects turnover, and the loop starts again with the effect of turnover on the size of the organization [49].

Given that perceived desirability and perceived ease of movement are deemed by TOE to have an influence on employee turnover [43], there is a need for management initiatives and interventions that can counter turnover intentions and promote the retention of employees by maintaining the equilibrium between employee contributions and organization inducements A diagram of the Theory of Organizational Equilibrium is presented in Fig. 1.

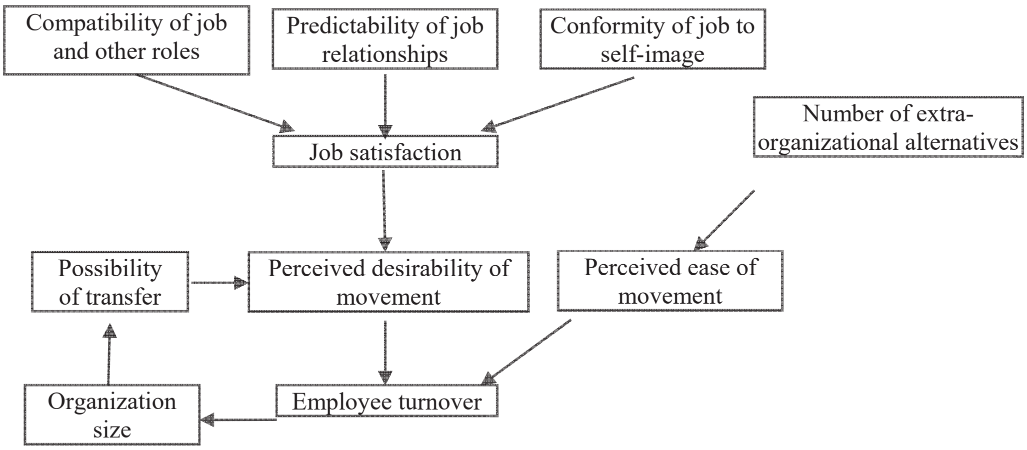

Fig. 1 March and Simon (1958)'s Theory of Organizational Equilibrium [47]

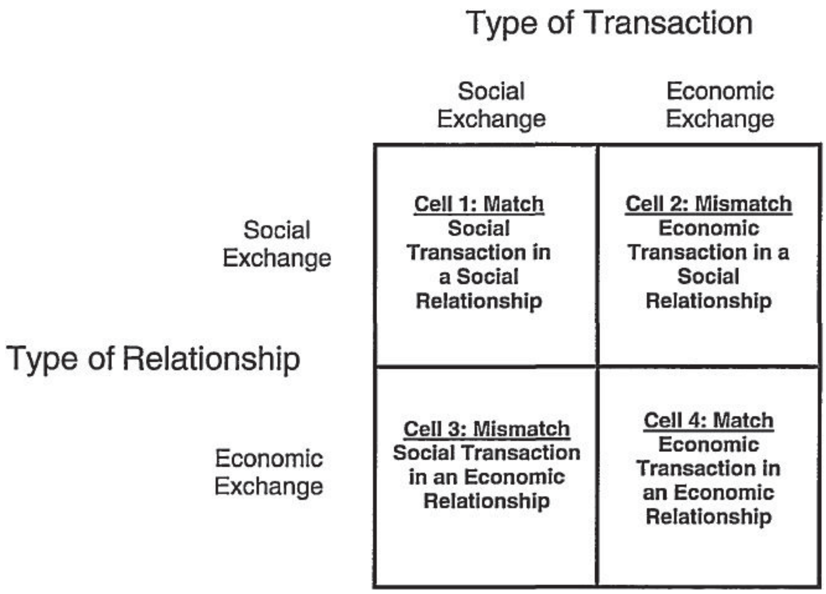

Fig. 2 Social Exchange Theory [53]

B. The Social Exchange Theory

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) arose from the work of [50], [51] and [52]. According to the review conducted by [53], the core principle of the Social Exchange Theory is that the relationship between two social entities depends on the extent to which each of these entities respects social rules and norms of exchange implicitly and explicitly agreed upon between the two parties. Some examples of the attributes defining the quality of such relationships include trust, loyalty and commitment. These attributes depend on factors such as love, status, information, money, goods and services that are generally invested by people into relationships. The Social Exchange Theory claims that the social rules and norms of exchange encompass the rule of reciprocity, as well as other explicitly negotiated rules. According to [50], [51] and [52], as cited by [53], the rule of reciprocity advocates that one should be treated according to how he or she is treating others. Therefore, negotiated rules are clearly detailed and documented in terms of an agreed set of rules and obligations between the participating parties. Other examples of rules and norms of exchange include altruism, group gain, status consistency and competition. According to [43], the Social Exchange Theory claims that employees are connected by a network made of ties whose strength influences their intention to keep or leave their jobs. This therefore calls for more research on the inferences of social networks theory and job embeddedness for voluntary turnover. Thus, in the perspective of the Social Exchange Theory, turnover intention is a consequence of the non-respect of implicitly or explicitly agreed rules by management or by colleagues. This means that an employee might voluntarily decide to quit the organization if there is a breach of prior agreements. Consequently, management efforts to reinforce implicitly or explicitly agreed upon rules can be considered as a retention strategy, especially for talented employees. A diagram of the Social Exchange Theory is presented in Fig. 2.

C. The Job Embeddedness Theory

According to [54], the Job Embeddedness Theory (JET) was initially proposed by [55]. JET postulates that employees have many connections and links within their organization and within their communities. As a result, they feel so fully integrated in their professional and social environment that they do not want to lose or sacrifice those links and connections for an unknown new job or for an unfamiliar new environment [54]. This theory singles out colleagues, relatives and friends as the key members shaping the work and community links of an employee. JET claims that employees' organizational and community integration depends on parameters such as their personal values, their career aspirations, as well as their knowledge and skills. It also depends on the organizational culture, the job requirements [54], as well as on general factors such as "climate, weather conditions, religious beliefs and entertainment activities". The sacrifices or losses that are identified by the Job Embeddedness Theory include "giving up familiar colleagues, interesting projects or desirable benefits" and "giving up an easy commute, good day care or local club membership" [54]. In the perspective of the Job Embeddedness Theory, employees stay in their current jobs if they are still feeling a sense of embeddedness towards their professional and social environment. Otherwise, they become receptive to turnover intention appeals. Retention strategies should therefore seek to maintain this feeling of a sense of embeddedness towards the professional and social environment, especially for talented employees. Fig. 3 adapted from [56], portrays the ideology behind the Job Embeddedness Theory.

D. Herzberg's Two-Factor Motivation-Hygiene Theory

According to the review of this theory conducted by [57], the Two-Factor Motivation-Hygiene Theory presented by Fig. 4 extracted from [58] was proposed by [59]. This theory reveals that there are two sets of factors in organizations: those that contribute to job satisfaction, also known as "motivation factors or motivators" and those that contribute to job dissatisfaction, the "hygiene factors". According to [59] as cited by [57], motivation factors include experience achievement, recognition, interesting work, increased responsibility, advancement and learning. The hygiene factors include unfair company policies, incompetent or unfair supervisors, unpleasant working conditions, unfair salary, threats to status and job insecurity ([59] as cited by [57]). The two-factor theory claims that motivation factors and hygiene factors are not simply opposites of each other. This implies that an employee who is dissatisfied because of unpleasant working conditions will not necessarily become satisfied if his or her working conditions suddenly become pleasant. According to this theory, an employee starts to respond to his or her turnover intention appeals when the factors that are contributing to one's overall satisfaction start to become negatively affected. This is for example the case when an employee starts to believe that their job is no more stimulating in terms of career growth and advancement, if their job is no more interesting or if they do not receive enough recognition. Therefore, retention strategies should seek to optimize motivation factors in order to inhibit employees' turnover intentions.

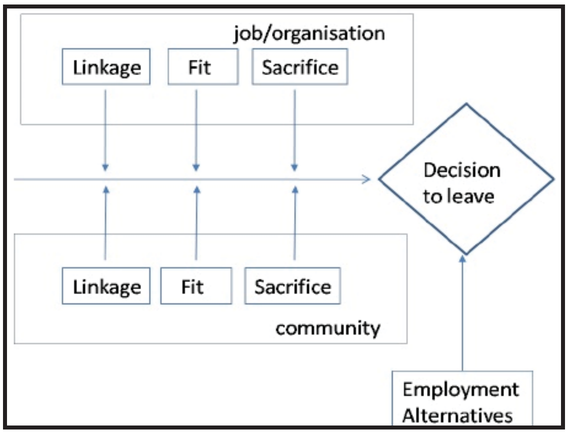

Fig. 3 Job Embeddedness Theory [56]

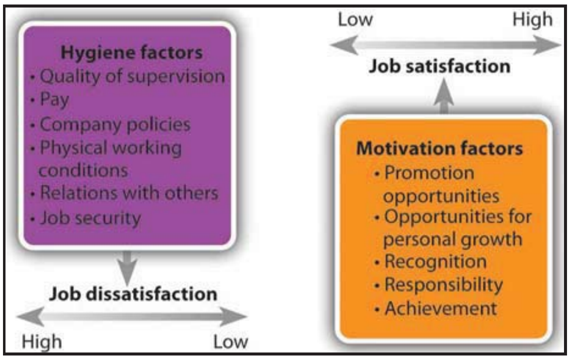

Fig. 4 Two-factor Theory [58]

E. The Resource-Based View

Initially proposed by [60], as cited by [61], The Resource Based Theory or View (RBT or RBV) presented by Fig. 5 posits that "resources contribute to [the] performance advantages [of organizations when] they are valuable, rare, costly to imitate and non-substitutable". This theory aims to explain what makes an organization gain a competitive advantage over others. Reference [60], as quoted by [61], defines resources as "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm". A firm is perceived as "having a competitive advantage when [it] can produce more economically and/or better satisfy customer needs, and thus enjoy superior performance relative to its competitors” [61]. Drawing from the work of [60], [61] posits that resources are deemed valuable when they can help to improve the firm’s output and efficiency. Additionally, [61] points out that “a valuable and rare resource can help sustain a firm’s competitive advantage to the extent that the resource is difficult to imitate”. In the perspective of the Resource-Based Theory or View, employees stay in their current jobs as long as they feel that they are still valued and regarded as special, a scarce resource that sustains the competitive advantage of their organization, otherwise they start becoming receptive to turnover intention appeals. Retention strategies should therefore seek to maintain employees’ feelings of usefulness in order to counter turnover intentions.

F. The Equity Theory

The Equity Theory, initially proposed by [62], (as shown in Fig. 6 adapted from [63]) assumes that people are motivated if they have a feeling of fairness and equity in their job’s inputs compared to their outcomes ratio. According to [64], “the focus of this theory is on the exchange relationship where individuals give something, their inputs, and expect something in return, the expected outcomes”. This theory postulates that the assessment of the value of the outcomes against the value of the inputs reveals a sense of equity or inequity for a given person or reference group. These reference groups include colleagues and relatives, or the individual themselves in a different but comparable role [64]. While inputs refer to the experience, skills and the efforts of an individual employee, his or her outcomes include for example pay, fringe benefits, responsibilities and awards [64]. The Equity Theory also assumes that people tend to act for the restoration of equity whenever they feel a sense of inequity. Thus, the alteration of inputs and the alteration of outputs are examples of equity restoration actions. According to [65], the Equity Theory is applicable to labor turnover and retention research where turnover intention can be seen as a consequence of perceived inequity. Consequently, management efforts to maintain an equitable work environment can be considered as a retention strategy to prevent turnover intentions.

G. The Human Capital Theory

Developed by [66], the Human Capital Theory (HCT) portrayed by Fig. 7 [67] posits that “education, training and development, and other knowledge have a positive impact on productivity and wages” [68]. According to [5], the Human Capital theory assumes that education is crucial in increasing the production capacity of employees. Therefore, it is vital for organizations to invest in the development of their employees in order to enhance their productivity levels. Other forms of return on investment (ROI) outputs that are mutually beneficial to the organization and to the employee include increased productivity and profits, and increased wages and income [68]. However, HCT also admits that education and training may enhance employees’ employability in the job market and induce turnover for better jobs. In the perspective of the Human Capital Theory, management efforts to invest in the education, training and development of their employees can be considered as an important turnover intention factor.

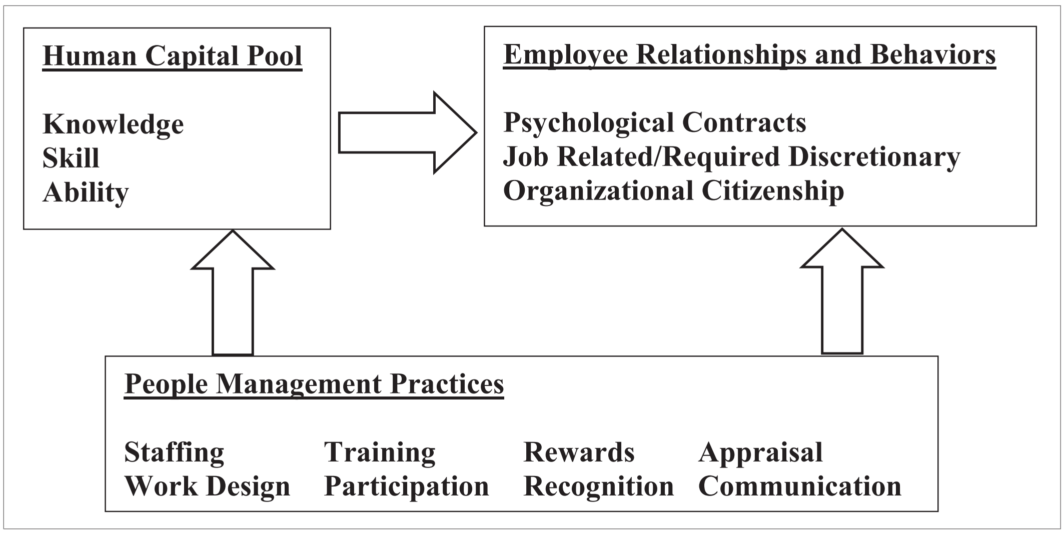

Fig. 5 Resource Based Theory [60]

H. The Expectancy-Confirmation Theory

The Expectancy-Confirmation Theory (ECT) (as shown in Fig. 8 [58]) was initially proposed by [69]. According to the review of this theory conducted by [70], the concept behind the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) is that, prior to any event, one has an expectation. If that expectation is met in a positive manner, then one is satisfied. If that expectation is met in a negative manner, then one is dissatisfied. The Expectancy Theory argues that “both the expectations prior to an event and the subsequent evaluation after the event combine to determine satisfaction with the event" ([69] as cited by [70]). The Expectancy Theory claims that "people enter work organizations with expectations and values and if these expectations and values are met [by the organization], they will likely remain a member of the organization" ([69] as cited by [70]). Likewise, [71] claims that employees join the organization with some expectations; thus, negative behaviors such as absenteeism and turnover intention will occur if those expectations are not met. Reference [40] identifies The Expectancy Theory as one of the fundamental theories at the heart of turnover and retention research. In fact, [40] provides "additional evidence to support the expectancy theory-based frameworks that have guided much of the research on turnover intent" ([28] as cited by [40]). In this regard, [71] affirms that turnover intention can be associated with the expectation of employees on issues such as rewards, training, working conditions and recognition. In the perspective of the Expectancy-Confirmation Theory, management efforts to evaluate and satisfy the expectations of their employees can be considered as a retention strategy especially for talented employees; and this can ultimately counter turnover intentions.

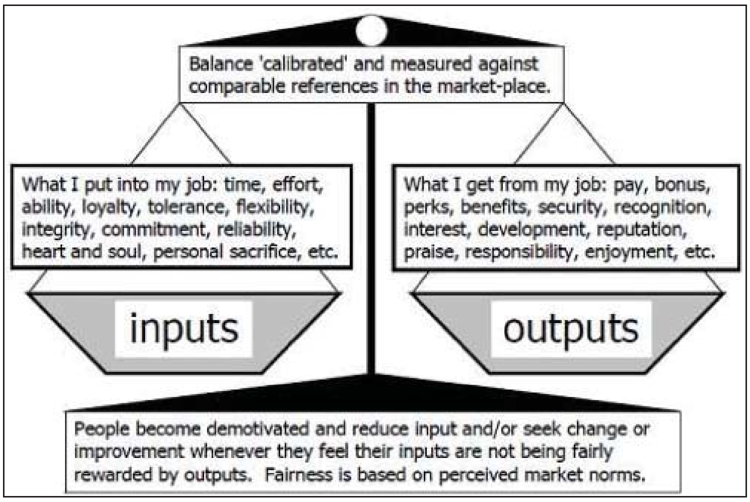

Fig. 6 Adam's Equity Theory [63]

VI. Conclusion and Contribution

This paper has identified and presented the main theories behind the existing research on turnover intention. Its main intention was to contribute to the clarification of the distinction between theories and models in the context of turnover, hence its sole focus on turnover intention theories, as opposed to past review papers where turnover intention theories are so mixed up with turnover intention models that their distinction is blurred.

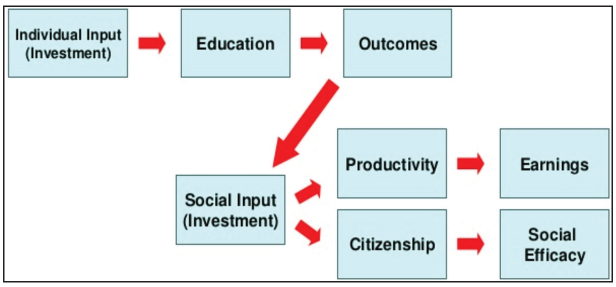

Fig. 7 Model of Human Capital Theory [67]

The main limitation of this study is its sole reliance on data uniquely drawn from freely downloadable Google Scholar papers.

Fig. 8 Vroom Expectancy Theory [58]

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