

## Impact of Organizational Cynicism on Turnover Intention: Mediation by Work Alienation

Örgütsel Sinizmin İşten Ayrılma Niyeti Üzerindeki Etkisi: İşe Yabancılaşmanın Aracılığı

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### ABSTRACT

Negative behaviors in the workplace affect well-being in the work environment. Organizational cynicism is frequently researched as one of the common negative behaviors in organizations. Individuals who experience cynicism may have turnover intentions. In addition, another negative concept closely related to turnover intention is work alienation. It is widely accepted that work alienation has a significant effect on turnover intention. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of organizational cynicism on turnover intention and to determine whether work alienation plays a role in this relationship. The research findings show that organizational cynicism has a significant and positive effect on turnover intention. In addition, there is a statistically significant relationship between organizational cynicism and work alienation. Finally, a partial mediating effect of job alienation was also found. The study of negative organizational behavior will help to better understand the challenges of modern organizations and contribute to the literature.

**Keywords:** Organizational Cynicism, Turnover, Turnover Intention, Work Alienation.

### Öz

İşyerindeki olumsuz davranışlar çalışma ortamının sağlığını etkilemektedir. Örgütsel sinizm, örgütlerdeki yaygın olumsuz davranışlardan biri olarak sıklıkla araştırılmaktadır. Sinizm yaşayan bireyler işten ayrılma niyetine sahip olabilirler. Bunun yanı sıra işe yabancılaşma, işten ayrılma niyeti ile yakında ilişkili bir diğer olumsuz kavramdır. İşe yabancılaşmanın işten ayrılma niyeti üzerinde önemli bir etkisi olduğu yaygın olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, örgütsel sinizmin işten ayrılma niyeti üzerindeki etkisini araştırmak ve işe yabancılaşmanın bu ilişkide bir rol oynayıp oynamadığını belirlemektir. Araştırma bulguları, örgütsel sinizmin işten ayrılma niyeti üzerinde önemli ve pozitif bir etkiye sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, örgütsel sinizm ile işe yabancılaşma arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmuştur. Son olarak, işe yabancılaşmanın kısmi aracılık etkisi tespit edilmiştir. Olumsuz örgütsel davranışın incelenmesi, modern örgütlerin yaşadıkları zorlukların daha iyi anlaşılmasına yardımcı olacak ve literatüre katkı sağlayacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Örgütsel Sinizm, İşten Ayrılma, İşten Ayrılma Niyeti, İşe Yabancılaşma.

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## Introduction

Cynicism, which is characterized by contempt, frustration, and distrust, has recently emerged as a critical issue in organizational studies (Feldman, 2000). Scholars suggest that cynicism is caused by a number of factors, including lack of resources, lack of organizational commitment, and increasing job expectations. Also, it is thought to have a negative effect on many attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, with turnover intention being the most important (Bernerth et al., 2007; Shahzad & Mehmood, 2012). Turnover intention is negatively associated with efficiency measures such as production efficiency, sales performance, and customer satisfaction, which are essential to organizations. Secondly, a relevant factor that influences cynicism is work alienation, which is defined as an employee's response to their job as opposed to the organization (Dean et al., 1998: 350). Employees who feel alienated from their jobs may perceive a lack of ownership and control over the product/service and its quality (Mottaz, 1981: 515) and finally lose interest in their jobs when they feel alienated (Hirschfeld, 2002). In addition, the attitudes and behaviors that result from work alienation promote adverse working conditions that enhance inefficiencies. (Sarros et al., 2002: 286). Despite all of its negative characteristics, recruiters do not take cynicism into account when making hiring decisions (Abraham, 2000). This situation has contributed to a surge in cynicism in recent years (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004). As a result, it may be anticipated that research in organizational cynicism may grow dramatically. As part of this effort, this study examines the impact of organizational cynicism on turnover intention and evaluates whether work alienation mediates this relationship.

## 1. Conceptual Framework

### 1.1. Organizational Cynicism

Cynicism exists in all kinds of organizations (Albrecht, 2002), and is a negative concept associated with contempt, frustration, distrust, hopelessness, and disillusionment (Andersson, 1996: 1397-1398), distress, disgust, and shame towards a person, group, institution or object (Dean et. al, 1998: 344). Various studies have yielded a variety of definitions of organizational cynicism. Wanous, Reichers and Austin (1994: 269) describe cynicism as a medium-range construct encompassing pessimism about the success of future organizational change, based on the belief that those responsible for change are incompetent, lazy or both. Abraham (2000: 269) describes cynicism as *"the belief that an organization lacks integrity, which, when coupled with a powerful negative emotional reaction, leads to disparaging and critical behavior"*. According to Wilkerson (2002: 533), organizational cynicism is a negative attitude towards organizations and their procedures, processes, and management based on the belief that these elements are contrary to employee's interest. In a comprehensive model, Dean and his colleagues (1998: 345) portray cynicism as a three-dimensional attitude toward the organization, incorporating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive dimension refers to employees' belief in the absence of integrity and principles such as fairness, equality, honesty, and sincerity in organizations. The affective dimension emphasizes individuals' strong negative emotions towards

organizations, including contempt, anger, sadness, shame, etc. (Abraham, 2000: 269). The behavioral dimension of organizational cynicism explains the tendency of individuals to engage in certain behaviors, including sarcastic humor, criticism of the organization, knowing looks and eye rolling (Dean et al., 1998: 346). These examples are considered to be cynical, although they are essentially behavioral tendencies, not the behaviors that characterize cynicism.

Social exchange theory provides insights into organizational cynicism (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003). This theory suggests that social interactions between employees are determined by the benefits received by individuals (Huston & Burgess, 1979). Accordingly, social exchange theory assumes that a person establishes a high-quality relationship with another person, which then returns to the person as a reward (Blau, 1964). Low quality social exchange is conducive to the emergence of cynicism. Johnson & O'Leary Kelly (2003) argue that cynicism in organizations is a reaction to violations of social exchanges in the organization. Accordingly, cynicism stems from the failure to fulfill certain promises given to the employee, the failure to meet expectations, or the observed experience of violations by others.

Cynicism is generally related to a number of consequences, including employee attitude (Andersson & Bateman, 1997), employee motivation (Wanous et al., 1994), job satisfaction (Wanous, et al., 1994; Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997; Abraham, 2000), organizational commitment (Aydemir & Karademir, 2017), work alienation (Abraham, 2000), organizational citizenship behavior (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Van Dyne, Graham & Dienesch, 1994), unethical behavior (Bakker, 2007).

## 1.2. Turnover Intention

Organizations incur high costs when employees leave their jobs. Turnover intention is widely used in research designs that address the situation of leaving job (Hom, 2011; Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). In essence, the term is described as a state of conscious and intentional willingness to leave the organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993: 262). The earlier theory of March and Simon (1958) stated that the intention to leave depends on the employees' perceived desirability and ease of movement from one organization to another. Besides, turnover intention can be the result of a social exchange relationship (Settoon, Bennett & Liden, 1996). Social exchange relationships occur when individuals have expectations of others and attempt to influence others to their advantage (Blau, 1964). These types of relationships include high-quality exchange relationships, reciprocity, and trust (Gouldner, 1960). The nature of social change can be explained by social exchange relationships (Staples and Webster, 2008: 256). When social exchange is negative, employees may decide to leave (Tepper et al., 2009). In assessing the results, turnover intention is reported to be closely related to organizational commitment (Joo & Park, 2010), job satisfaction (Applebaum et al., 2010), and work alienation (Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010).

### 1.3. Work alienation

Work alienation is a concept that indicates a low level of employee involvement in the job role and shows the extent to which people are not connected to the work atmosphere (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000: 790). Alienation in the workplace occurs when a person is not allowed to express him/herself and low quality of work relationships is observed (Nair & Vohra, 2010). In other words, when workers are allowed to participate in workplace decisions and are satisfied with their jobs, the work alienation is low (Sarros et al., 2002). Seeman (1959) explains five dimensions of work alienation as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. Powerlessness and meaninglessness are considered the two most important dimensions (Kanungo, 1982; DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005). Powerlessness means the expectation or possibility that one's own behavior will not determine the occurrence of desired outcomes or reinforcers (Kakabadse, 1986: 459). Meaninglessness occurs when workers believe that their contribution to the overall production process is small and that their role in this process is not crucial (Mottaz, 1981: 515-516). In terms of consequences, work alienation has a negative impact on employees' attitudes and behaviors, such as organizational commitment (Tummers & Den Dulk, 2013), job satisfaction (Hirschfeld, 2002) and turnover intention (Taboli, 2015), so that employees cannot perform satisfactorily (Michaels et al., 1988).

### 1.4. Research Hypotheses

Literature indicates that cynicism is a predictor of turnover intention (Leiter & Maslach, 2009; Spence Laschinger, et al., 2009; Khan, 2014). Additionally, research indicates that organizational cynicism influences occupational alienation. Abraham (2000), for example, observed significant, two-way link between organizational cynicism and work alienation. Furthermore, studies show that turnover intentions increase due to work alienation (Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010; Taboli, 2015). Therefore, cynical attitudes lead to higher levels of work alienation and increase the turnover intention. Although several studies have explored the association between organizational cynicism, work alienation, and turnover intention, none of these studies have examined the mediating role of work alienation. Our research hypotheses are as follows:

*Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>1</sub>):* Organizational cynicism will have a positive correlation with turnover intention.

*Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>2</sub>):* Organizational cynicism will have a positive correlation with work alienation.

*Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>):* Work alienation will have a positive correlation with turnover intention.

*Hypothesis 4 (H<sub>4</sub>):* Work alienation will mediate the relationship between organizational cynicism and turnover intention.

Figure 1 illustrates the research model; while the solid lines represent a direct relationship between variables ( $H_1$ ,  $H_2$ ,  $H_3$ ), the dotted lines represent the mediating effect of work alienation ( $H_4$ ).

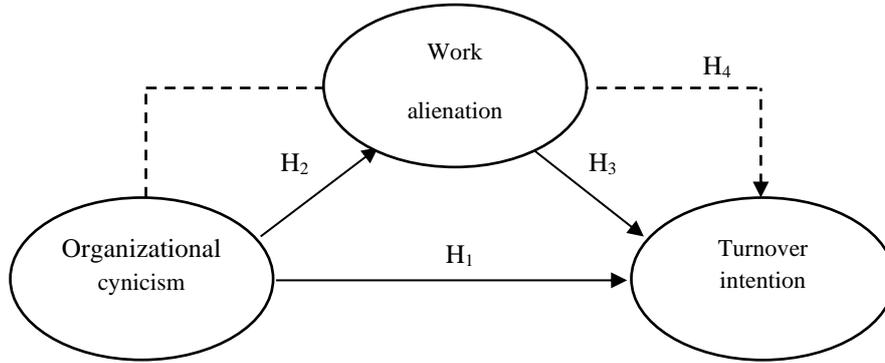


Figure 1. Research Model

## 2. Research Method

### 2.1. Participants

The population consists of white-collar employees working in the public and private sector in Adana. A survey of 323 full-time employees was conducted using the convenience and snowball sampling strategies. The questionnaires were distributed electronically. The sample's gender distribution is 60.4 percent for the female ( $n = 318$ ), while the marital status distribution is 55.7 percent for single. The average age range is between 25-34 ages as 63.8 percent.

### 2.2. Measurement

For *organizational cynicism*, we utilized the scale by Brandes, Dharwadkar, and Dean (1999) which is adapted into Turkish by Karacaoğlu and Ince (2012), and consists of 13 items ( $\alpha=.91$ ) with 3 dimensions i.e., cognitive ( $\alpha=0.87$ ), affective ( $\alpha=.94$ ) and behavioral ( $\alpha=.82$ ). The Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh, 1979) adapted into Turkish by Gürbüz and Bekmezci (2012) was used to measure *turnover intention*. The scale consists of 3 items ( $\alpha=0.82$ ). *Work alienation* scale (Hirschfeld & Field, 2000) adapted by Özbek (2011) consists of 10 items ( $\alpha=0.80$ ). Measurements were conducted on a five-point scale labeled as (1) Strongly Disagree, (5) Strongly Agree. In addition to the three scales, the questionnaire also included demographic questions.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Examining the data structure, the normal distribution assumption (test statistic for skewness and kurtosis within  $\pm 1.5$ ) was provided without any transformation, five observations have been classified as outliers and are therefore eliminated ( $r < 0.8$ ,  $VIF < 2.5$ ). Although all three scales have already been adopted and validated in Turkish, it is important to report evidences about the sample. In order to test the construct validity of the scales, we employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with Jamovi 2.2 (The Jamovi Project, 2020). Confirmatory factor analysis generates better objective interpretation of unidimensionality than does exploratory factor analysis (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988), The tested CFA model fit was assessed using  $\chi^2$ , the comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), standardized mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), with the following criteria for satisfactory fit:  $CFI > 0.9$ ,  $TLI > 0.9$ ,  $SRMR < 0.01$  and  $RMSEA < 0.08$ . A good fit is  $CFI > 0.95$ ,  $TLI > 0.95$ , and  $RMSEA$  and upper CI for  $RMSEA < 0.05$ . (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger & Müller, 2003). Internal consistency was estimated with the Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951). Mediation tests were performed with Jamovi GLM package (Gallucci, 2020) to examine research hypotheses.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA results are given in Table 1 and the model fit indices are indicated in Table 2. The sample was found to be normally distributed, and the maximum-likelihood estimation method is used to evaluate the model and estimate model parameters. The chi-square fit statistic ( $\chi^2=470$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was statistically significant; but it is known that this statistic is sensitive to sample size. Besides, other fit indices ( $CFI=0.947$ ;  $TLI=0.938$ ;  $SRMR=0.0507$ ;  $RMSEA=0.0656$ ) consistently indicate that our model was adequate

**Table 1.** Factor Loadings

Factor	Indicator	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		Z	p	Stand. estimate
				Lower	Upper			
OC- cognitive	OC- C 1	1.130	0.0651	1.002	1.258	17.4	<.001	0.817
	OC- C 2	1.117	0.0634	0.993	1.242	17.6	<.001	0.825
	OC- C 3	1.174	0.0615	1.054	1.295	19.1	<.001	0.868
	OC- C 4	1.035	0.0690	0.900	1.170	15.0	<.001	0.739
	OC- C 5	1.155	0.0609	1.036	1.274	19.0	<.001	0.864
OC- affective	OC- A 1	1.272	0.0546	1.165	1.379	23.3	<.001	0.964
	OC- A 2	1.224	0.0539	1.118	1.330	22.7	<.001	0.950
	OC- A 3	1.235	0.0568	1.123	1.346	21.7	<.001	0.927
OC- behavioral	OC- B 3	0.812	0.0766	0.662	0.963	10.6	<.001	0.666
	OC- B 4	1.160	0.0848	0.994	1.326	13.7	<.001	0.938
WA	WA 1	1.011	0.0951	0.824	1.197	10.6	<.001	0.568
	WA 3	1.067	0.0901	0.890	1.244	11.8	<.001	0.620
	WA 4	1.358	0.0850	1.192	1.525	16.0	<.001	0.778
	WA 5	1.300	0.0781	1.147	1.453	16.6	<.001	0.798
	WA 6	1.412	0.0870	1.241	1.583	16.2	<.001	0.785
	WA 7	1.353	0.0884	1.180	1.526	15.3	<.001	0.752
	WA 8	1.044	0.0767	0.894	1.195	13.6	<.001	0.692
	WA 9	1.270	0.0835	1.106	1.433	15.2	<.001	0.750
	WA 10	1.105	0.0932	0.923	1.288	11.9	<.001	0.622
	TI	TI 1	1.303	0.0694	1.167	1.439	18.8	<.001
TI 2		1.179	0.0719	1.038	1.320	16.4	<.001	0.793
TI 3		1.309	0.0687	1.175	1.444	19.1	<.001	0.882

OC: Organizational cynicism; WA: Work alienation; TI: Turnover intention

**Table 2.** Model Fit

$\chi^2$	df	p	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA	RMSEA 90% CI	
							Lower	Upper
470	199	<.001	0.947	0.938	0.0507	0.0656	0.0579	0.0732

### 3.2. Reliability analysis

The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the organizational cynicism scale was 0.92, while cognitive, affective and behavioral subscales were 0.91, 0.96 and 0.77, respectively. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the work alienation scale was 0.90. For turnover intention, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.89. All coefficients indicated good to excellent internal consistency and reliability (Nunnally, 1994).

### 3.3. Correlation analysis

A correlation analysis was conducted to evaluate the direction and degree of relationships among the variables. Pearson correlation coefficient was used for the normal distribution of the data. The results are shown in Table 3. There is a strong correlation between organizational cynicism and turnover intention ( $r=0.622$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and turnover intention has significant relations with OC - cognitive ( $r = 0.542$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), OC - affective ( $r=0.613$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and OC - behavioral ( $r=0.350$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Also, work alienation is positively correlated to turnover intention ( $r=0.571$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). In addition, organizational cynicism is positively correlated to work alienation ( $r=0.694$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and work alienation has significant correlations with OC - cognitive ( $r=0.638$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), OC - affective ( $r=0.632$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and OC - behavioral ( $r=0.390$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

**Table 3.** Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. OC					
2. OC - cognitive	0.932***				
3. OC - affective	0.861***	0.687***			
4. OC - behavioral	0.611***	0.423***	0.388***		
5. WA	0.694***	0.638***	0.632***	0.390***	
6. TI	0.622***	0.542***	0.613***	0.350***	0.571***

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; OC: Organizational cynicism; WA: Work alienation; TI: Turnover intention

### 3.4. Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating role of work alienation on the linkage between organizational cynicism and turnover intention. Analysis results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Mediation Analysis

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% C.I. (a)		$\beta$	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
Indirect	OC $\Rightarrow$ WA $\Rightarrow$ TI	0.248	0.0565	0.137	0.359	0.186	4.38	<.001
Component	OC $\Rightarrow$ WA	0.877	0.0511	0.777	0.978	0.694	17.16	<.001
	WA $\Rightarrow$ TI	0.282	0.0623	0.160	0.404	0.268	4.53	<.001
Direct	OC $\Rightarrow$ TI	0.581	0.0788	0.426	0.735	0.436	7.37	<.001
Total	OC $\Rightarrow$ TI	0.828	0.0586	0.713	0.943	0.622	14.13	<.001

OC: Organizational cynicism; WA: Work alienation; TI: Turnover intention

The results reveal that the total effect of organizational cynicism on turnover intention is significant ( $\beta=0.828$ ,  $z = 14.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). With the inclusion of mediation by work alienation, the impact of organizational cynicism on turnover intention is still significant ( $\beta=0.581$ ,  $z = 7.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The indirect effect of organizational cynicism on turnover intention through work alienation is significant ( $\beta=0.248$ ,  $z = 4.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This shows that the relationship between organizational cynicism and turnover intention is partially mediated by work alienation.

## Discussion

There is evidence to support the hypothesis that organizational cynicism is positively associated with turnover intention ( $H_1$ ). This finding is consistent with international literature (Leiter & Maslach, 2009; Spence Laschinger et al., 2009; Leiter, Price & Spence Laschinger, 2010; Chiaburuet al., 2013; Khan, 2014; Nazir et al., 2016; Munir, Ghafoor, & Rasli, 2018; Yang et al., 2020) as well as Turkish literature (Polat & Meydan, 2010; Mesci, 2014; Çınar, Karcıoğlu & Aslan, 2014; Güzel & Ayazlar, 2014; Akova & Kılıç, 2015; Yasım & Adem, 2016; Gökçe et al., 2017; Çaylak & Altuntaş, 2017; Bulut & Hovardaoğlu, 2018; Demirci, & Tekiner, 2019; Sungur et al., 2019). Our findings also revealed that work alienation has a significant effect on turnover intention ( $H_3$ ). As the level of work alienation among employees rises, so does the likelihood of turnover. This study's result is consistent with previous researches in the literature (Ünsar & Karahan, 2011; Ayaydın, 2012; Tuna & Yeşiltaş, 2014; Kurtulmuş & Yiğit, 2016; Tokmak, 2020, Çiftçi, 2021). Examining the international literature, only a few studies exist to investigate the relationship between work alienation and turnover intention. The study's findings are consistent with previous research (i.e., Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010; Taboli, 2015).

Organizational cynicism and work alienation have a statistically significant correlation ( $H_2$ ). Our findings reveal that the level of work alienation increases as organizational cynicism increases; which is consistent with earlier research (i.e., Abraham, 2000; Yıldız, Akgün ve Yıldız, 2013; Yıldız & Şaylıkay, 2014; Koçoğlu, 2014; Çivilidağ, 2015; Akpolat & Oğuz, 2015; Li & Chen, 2018; Demir, Ayas & Yıldız, 2018; Akar, 2019; Jiang et al., 2019). When work alienation was included into the influence of

organizational cynicism on turnover intention, the effect was still significant (H<sub>4</sub>). Thus, cynicism influence turnover intention either directly or indirectly via work alienation. This research shows that managers should focus not just on cynicism but also on the consequences of work alienation in order to reduce or avoid employee turnover intentions.

Eliminating inequalities and unfair distribution, adhering to psychological contracts, determining satisfying wages, enhancing working conditions, reducing or removing stressors, and facilitating effective communication within the organization are all critical elements for preventing employee turnover. Organizations can enhance their human resources policies and practices in order to reduce or prevent cynicism, work alienation, and intention to leave the organization.

We have demonstrated that work alienation partially mediated the effect of cynicism on turnover intention. Examination of negative organizational behaviors may help us better understand common issues in modern organizations, as well as discover potential solutions for dealing with or minimizing it. The study has certain limitations. We employed cross-sectional data, which limits causality. Alternative and robust sampling methods, mixed research methods, and comparisons of organization types (e.g., public and private) can further provide a comprehensive insight into the topic.

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