

Inclusive Leadership in Relationship with Psychological Distress, Organizational Climate and Social Intelligence: A Theoretical Framework Study

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ABSTRACT

The chain of global change phenomena occurring in life today has resulted in the urgent need to place world-class education as outlined in the Malaysia Blueprint 2013-2025. Hence, the Ministry of Education installed high-performing leaders in all schools by adopting the Transformative leadership style. The post-pandemic crisis is still haunting the lives of everyone, including teachers¹ in schools. The urgency of change makes many teachers experience psychological distress. Therefore, the call to conduct research holistically in leadership, management, and resources to overcome the issue. Hence, this article describes a theoretical framework based on gaps and limitations in most past literature. The theoretical lens of social exchange theory contributes to the relationship between Inclusive Leadership, psychological stress, organizational climate and Social Intelligence. Eventually, the Inclusive Leadership style is not yet widely practiced in schools compared to the Transformational leadership style practiced since 2013. Based on literature reviews, this theoretical framework study uses to investigate Inclusive Leadership in curbing psychological distress among school teachers through organizational Climate and Social intelligence mediation. Therefore, the study of this theory aims to contribute to the field of Educational Leadership and Crisis management. And also beneficial not only to the Ministry of Education and to humankind.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature in leadership and organization crisis management. Besides, it also contributes to psychological and mental disorders among the employees especially among the schoolteachers in school. In addition it is also one of very few studies which have investigated in school and our country, Malaysia about Inclusive Leadership associated

with psychological distress. It is beneficial to the teachers, community and ministry of education.

1. Introduction

This theoretical framework study is about Inclusive Leadership is considered a new leadership style and is gaining ground among existing leaders but also in the business sector, manufacturing industry, telecommunications, healthcare, security agencies and education. The existence of leadership style has attracted attention from researchers abroad in China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Italy, and Spain, but not in our country. This article will discuss some aspects of the background of the study, the significance of the study, research questions, research objectives, research hypothesis, literature review, model approach & theories and theoretical framework showing the relationship between Inclusive leadership, Psychological Distress, Organizational Climate and Social Intelligence.

1.1. Background

The theoretical framework pivoted on Inclusive leadership styles that can reduce psychological distress. Inclusive leadership styles emerged in the 2000s. Many foreign countries have adopted and adapted management in various sectors. Studies on leadership style effects gained momentum as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. There were lots of articles have been written about it. Among the most recent studies that parse and research Inclusive leadership styles revolve around the onset of the epidemic in the Wuhan State of China ([Ahmed et al., 2019](#)). They found that inclusive leadership can reduce psychological distress among health care workers during critical times. Management's support and attention to employees with psychological disruption can recover and function well during a crisis. Studies on Inclusive Leadership continue to grow in [Nair and Sivakumar \(2020\)](#) and many more. It is sufficient to prove that Inclusive Leadership is appropriate and can be practiced, both in times of peace and in crisis. Since the covid-19 pandemic to all parts of the world, including Malaysia, we have faced symptoms of depression, fear and stress ([Rathakrishnan et al., 2022a](#)). We are often shocked by suicides, sexual harassment, bullying, and violence in schools or nursing homes that may be related to psychological distress ([Perry et al. \(2020\)](#)). The chain of global change phenomena occurring in life today has resulted in the urgent need to place world-class education as outlined in the Malaysia Blueprint 2013-2025 ([Adams et al., 2020](#)). Hence, the Ministry of Education installed high-performing leaders in all schools by adopting the Transformative leadership style. The post-pandemic crisis is still haunting the lives of everyone, including teachers in schools. Apart from that, incidents and natural disasters such as droughts, mud floods, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes also contribute to fear and anxiety among the teachers and the public ([Bikar et al., 2021](#)). The urgency of change makes many teachers experience psychological distress. Therefore, this theoretical framework study unravels the question of such symptoms in leadership, management, and resources ([Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019](#)). From the literature review and reports, the increase in numbers affected by psychological distress shows its existence in the lives of, not only the public but also among teachers or educators.

1.2. The importance of the theoretical study

Based on the indications of previous empirical studies, various stressor factors influenced the symptoms. On the Ministry of Health and National Statistics Department websites, there is an increase in mental illnesses described as killer diseases after high blood pressure or "Stroke". In 2016 reports, Malaysian >16 yr. and above experienced mental health problems at 29.2 % (Rahman & Don, 2016; Unit, 2017). A study in Malaysia by AIA Vitality in 2019 on 47 organizations from various sectors with a total of 15, 369 participants. 53% found in high-risk mental health issues (Alias et al., 2019). It is about 12% suffering from a high level of Anxiety and Depression. Health Safety Executive, the United Kingdom, November 2020, reported that about 828,000 workers were affected by work-related stress (Wels, 2020). Gallup in 2018 reported that many countries show that 50% of their population has experience depression, anxiety, and stress in Ukraine, Albania, Venezuela, Philippines, Turkey, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Costa Rica, and the USA (Helliwell et al., 2019). In the USA, 19.0% of adults experience mental illness, equivalent to 47 million people (Rienert et al., 2020). The gap between such studies is widening yet does not lead to holistic approaches. Therefore, this theoretical framework study offers a model that combines four constructs, inclusive leadership, psychological distress, organizational climate and social intelligence dismantling the teachers' mental health at this time. Inclusive leadership is one of the leadership styles that emphasize the inclusiveness of the involvement of all members in the institution and takes into account the views, ideas, and contributions, regardless of position limits, and even reaching out to the local community. This kind of leadership style can relieve stress and fear among people. Similarly, the elements of organizational climate and social intelligence play a role in balancing mental health among teachers in the workplace. This study can contribute to the development of school management while enriching the wealth of literature in management and psychology.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inclusive Leadership VS Psychological Distress

A registered company in the United Kingdom, Employer Network for Equality & Inclusion (ENEI), defines *"leaders who are aware of their own bias and preferences, actively seek out and consider different views and perspectives to form better decision-making. They see diverse talent as a source of competitive advantage and inspire diverse people to drive organizational and individual performance towards a shared vision."* (Stefani & Blessinger, 2017). In referring to the International Educational and social handbook, it is an inclusive leadership style that brings all people to work together and contribute with full engagement in the decision-making process and shaping reality (Ryan, 2014). It also calls for collaborating efforts for school improvement that it is mindful of all stakeholders, people with diverse skills and knowledge and access to resources. Inclusive Leadership is a leader who shows reflectiveness, openness, and accessibility in their relationships with their followers Carmeli, 2010 as cited in (Fang et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). Inclusive Leadership seizes effort by leaders to embrace others in their thoughts and considerations in which their opinion and perception strength will be absent Nembhard & Edmonson 2006, as cited in (Fang et al., 2021; Fang, 2019; Zhao et al., 2020). So, employees may speak openly in any discussion and endorse their new ideas (i.e., Psychological Distress). Therefore, Inclusive Leadership study stressed on Psychological Distress of employees. Psychological Distress is a mental pain condition associated with stressors and demands to deal with in daily life (Trivedi,

2020). Inclusivity or inclusiveness is one factor having effect on employees' Psychological Distress. Existing researchers work on the association between Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Distress and found positive relations (Zhao et al., 2020). Studies proposed that Inclusive Leaders affect Psychological Distress in several ways. First, they are role models for their juniors, encouraging them to think and have a sense of belonging (Katsaros, 2022; Tran & Choi, 2019). Second, the essential information and assets to their subordinate for their clear vision and expectation about their roles. Besides, provide support and facilitate their need. Thirdly, they motivate their followers by promoting inclusiveness regardless of positions. Its invited participation and contribution are beneficial to all. Lastly, they assure nobody to punish for doing badly or being mistaken, instead permitting them to come forward to discuss and make proper corrections as agreed. Inclusive Leadership reflects as an agent of change. So, whenever leaders demonstrate any new idea, employees gain support for curbing their Psychological Distress. Leaders who validate their appearance of Inclusive Leadership endorse justice input and output of all workers (Fang et al., 2021; Fang, 2019). Inclusive Leaders never work with employees, but they work with the employee and inspire them by endorsing their new ideas. Inclusive Leadership focus on an inclusive process where they challenge the guarantee of the employees' contribution in input and output to their work (Bourke & Espedido, 2019). This type of behaviour of leaders promotes a positive environment that permits innovative work behaviour and encourages psychological well-being among their subordinates (Javed et al., 2019).

This attitude and style strengthened with Relational Leadership and social exchange theory (Sklaveniti, 2016). Relational leadership theory is an individual-centric which the impact of togetherness and draws attention to the variance's collective participation. Social exchange theory is one of the social interactions in social science (Schilke et al., 2015). By basing these two theories, the theoretical framework has a foundation to support the research question and hypothesis. Hence the study proposed that:

H1: There is a positive relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Distress.

2.2. Inclusive Leadership VS Organizational Climate

The earliest references can be traced to 1939 in Kurt Lewin's work and his colleagues, as stated in "Social Climate" (Malek, & Yusof, 2022). Litwin & Stringer (1968) described the climate as the "shared belief, and values members constitute the perceived work environment." Based on the definition above, it is clear that the environment includes sharing beliefs about matters related to the Organizational Climate based on values, culture, customs and so on that color the work environment. However, the environmental climate will threaten worse than ever as density grows and emigration prevalence to the city diversify in culture and customs by 2030. The fear increased in mental diseases among the population, especially the dumping of information on terrorism, murder, fraud, slander, blackmail and many more that make the world unsafe for living (Nesi, 2020; Srivastava, 2009). Because of that, attitudes and behavior need to lead to an environment conducive to all residents. Mutual respect, collaboration, teamwork, and tolerance can strengthen relationships with each other while creating a cheerful and happy atmosphere. The firmness of a positive Climate encourages the psychological well-being of employees. Existing studies suggest that the leaders' behavior contributes to the Organizational Climate approach (Ashikali et al., 2020). Particularly, Nair and Sivakumar (2020) said that when leaders show reflectiveness, openness, and accessibility, they are probable to assist

the progress of Organizational Climate among the followers. Leaders motivate followers and take a risk by establishing the significance of such behavior and promising followers that there will not be the appearance of negative consequences from such behavior (Purohit & Wadhwa, 2012). Being open and accessible will allow them to converse their belief. If a leader is friends with their followers and encourages them to express feelings, they feel safe and relieved. The notion showed in existing studies (Zhu et al., 2020; Qi & Liu, 2017; Zeng et al., 2019). The study revealed a positive association between Inclusive Leadership and Organizational Climate. The studies proposed that employees perceived that their expression and voice were heard, felt satisfied and hence the sense of belongingness stuck in their minds. Thus, the proposed hypothesis as below:

H2. Inclusive Leadership has a significant and direct effect on Organizational Climate.

2.3. Inclusive Leadership VS Social Intelligence

Social Intelligence is "Social Skills". Social skills are helpful for a person to lead a peaceful life and not act outside of values, culture and norms in socializing and relationships with other people. For individuals who possess high social skills, their attitude and behavior encompassed five main traits, situational awareness, presence, authentic, clarity and empathy as mentioned in the book "Social Intelligence: The New Science of Success" (Albrecht & Kessel, 2018). Based on the ability that a person has includes skills in verbal and non-verbal communication, being very sensitive to social rules and their role, listening, understanding the feelings of others, active role in social activities and having attractiveness and management (Rathakrishnan et al., 2022b). Therefore, the theoretical framework suggests that the leader's behavior is also significant to social skills. The attitude and leadership style that portrays interest in management and intelligent character in the social aspect is one of the things that captivate and anchors the hearts of subordinates. Subordinate employees feel happy and confident in their patients and not volatile. Every problem is solved by discussion and taking a collective approach. Things like this can influence and encourage the employees in a state of confusion, worry-some and frustration to become relieved and calm. Therefore, in the theoretical framework, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Inclusive Leadership has a significant and direct effect on Social Intelligence.

2.4. Organizational Climate VS Psychological Distress

As explained earlier, it is a disease related to Depression, Anxiety and Stress. This symptom has been studied and known for a long time. Varying methods to cure and views from different disciplines, such as anthropologists, psychologists and psychiatrists, sociologists and theologians or spiritual, the symptoms constantly affect human life. We can also know various medical prescriptions to overcome it. Hans Selye in 1936 is one of the medical doctors who pioneered stress symptoms (Fink, 2016). While Sigmund Freud is among the individuals who talk a lot about "Melancholia" (Freud, 2013). As a result, many debate studies on this symptom. Various empirical studies that unravel the causes of this phenomenon exist in human life. Some people attribute this symptom to workload, source of income, creative and innovative work, teamwork, dirty job and many more that affect their health (Bahkia et al., 2020). However, all alleviated with support and motivation to continue engaging in their duties (Rathakrishnan et al., 2022c). A study in schools affected teachers with musculoskeletal who suffer from long psychological distress (Ng et al., 2019; Voo et al., 2020). It is viewed only from a physical or external

surface. The work environment fails to be understood as it includes speech and reactions in the company of colleagues who share the same space. The relationship between the employer, employee, and the community is considered part and parcel of the environment. The theoretical framework suggested examining the relationship between Organizational Climate and Psychological Distress. In the work environment, elements affect mental health. In previous studies, many similar problems have been unraveled, such as cases of bullying, sexual harassment, injustice, violence and toxic leadership as part of the environment. This theoretical framework assumes that:

H4: Organizational Climate has a significant and direct effect on Psychological Distress.

2.5. Social Intelligence vs Psychological Distress

The ability of a person who has high social skills is not easily affected by the symptoms that haunt most people nowadays (Azanedo et al., 2020). As discussed earlier, individuals who practice a lifestyle that does not like the atmosphere of conflict always respect others and feel empathy and self-efficacy (Zautra et al., 2015). That is why it is easy to adapt to the situation and establish relationships with other in the blink of an eye. Apart from that, you can quickly recognize other people's personalities accurately. In short, individuals who feel comfortable in critical situations and can control their feelings have high social intelligence (Liu & Boyatzis, 2021). Therefore, Social Intelligence and Psychological Distress have a positive relationship. Hence, in this study, it is suggested that:

H5: Social Intelligence has a significant and direct effect on psychological distress.

2.6. Organizational Climate and Social Intelligence as a Mediation.

In this theoretical framework, Organizational Climate and social intelligence facilitate variables linking Inclusive Leadership and Psychological distress. Many existing works of literature talk about the organizational Climate and Social intelligence having abilities to mitigate stress. That is why this theoretical framework intended to examine whether they function as mediators or not as the research questions. Climate is associated with encouraging the production of creative work and innovation, increasing quality and productivity, collaborative work and creation to look neat and beautiful. It is rarely manipulated as an agent to deal with the psychological distress among employees. Previous studies have shown that the issue of climate has been a hot topic for a long time, and there has not been a single definition of it reached by consensus. Various instruments are available to measure. Scholars have not stopped exploring what exactly is meant by climate. Apparently, among leaders, it is increasingly easy to forget the importance of a good work environment and the saddest thing is the lack of attention to mental health among subordinates. Psychological distress among employees not attending. However, the attention it deserves. In the circles of psychiatry and psychologists, psychological distress still takes the factor of income and family ties as a contributor to mental disorders. There is no denying that psychological distress is also related to diseases experienced such as cancer, diabetes, hypertension, homesick, cultural gap and more (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021), but environmental factors play a role, and social support can also reduce stress. The same is the case with the medical doctor's approach to treating these symptoms with various medicines. Sometimes, it only disappears for a while. Moreover, it has a side effect compared to making the environment more comfortable (Hattingh et al., 2017). Therefore, the theoretical framework hypothesized as below:

H6: Organizational climate has significantly mediated the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and psychological distress.

Such is the case with Social Intelligence which has been present for a long time among social researchers. Social conflict fails to apprehend social context because they lack social intelligence. Humans are vulnerable to life in a social context. Social interpretation bias to other people and feels that he is good and right. His behaviour affects others. For example, one person's view of another often occurs without limits. It doesn't matter the position, gender, and welcome to participate. Undesirable perceptions of others can lead to various implications for others. If it happens to both will experience psychological distress. Therefore, Social intelligence needs to measure to what extent it functions as a link to Inclusive leadership and Psychological distress.

H7: Social Intelligence has significantly mediated the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Psychological distress.

This theoretical framework is to investigate the effectiveness of leadership style in dealing with psychological distress in past research surveys. The existing studies, leaders put heavy concern on the organization reputation, stay competitive in business and make a profit. They less emphasis on employees' mental health care.

3. Methodology

To understand more about Inclusive Leadership in dealing with psychological distress, take a quantitative research design approach. The selection of this approach gears toward an intensive literature review and matches research questions and goals. The relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables strengthened by theories such as Social Exchange and Relational Leadership Theory. Driven by a "win-win situation", reciprocity between the two parties on "giving and receiving" can bind as a sign of respect and adhere to the promise or agreement to achieve goals. Data from a sample representative uses to measure the interrelationships between variables in this model. The theoretical study proposed the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach (Paek et al., 2022; Awang, 2012; Awang et al., 2016). This model can analyze with various software such as Jamovi, PIS-SEM, SPSS with AMOS, MPlus, SATA and many more.

3.1. Theoretical Framework Study

Goals and Research questions to response based on the theoretical framework study. The theoretical refers to [Figure 1](#) below where four (4) constructs are linked to each other. Direct relationship are shown with arrows that connect one (1) construct to another. For example, Inclusive Leadership (IL) has a direct relationship with Psychological Distress. Similarly, Inclusive leadership is linked to Organizational Climate and Social Intelligence.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

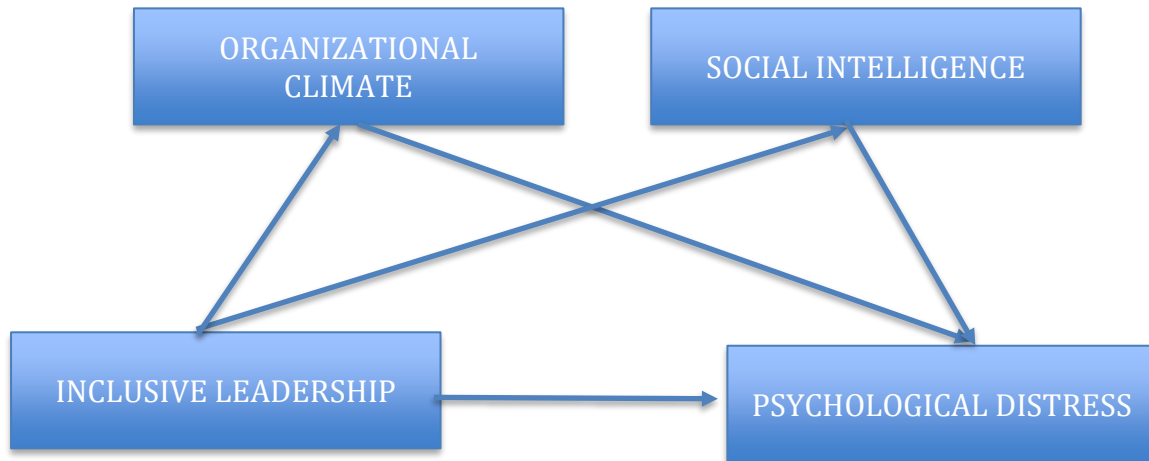


Figure 2 is a breakdown of the theoretical framework which show the relationship between the constructs with research questions. Each pair of constructs is shown to be directly related in the statement of the research questions.

Figure 2: Constructs Relationship with Research Questions



RQ1: Does (IL) has a significant and direct effect on (PD)?



RQ2: Does (IL) has a significant and direct effect on (OC)?



RQ3: Does (IL) has a significant and direct effect on (SI)?



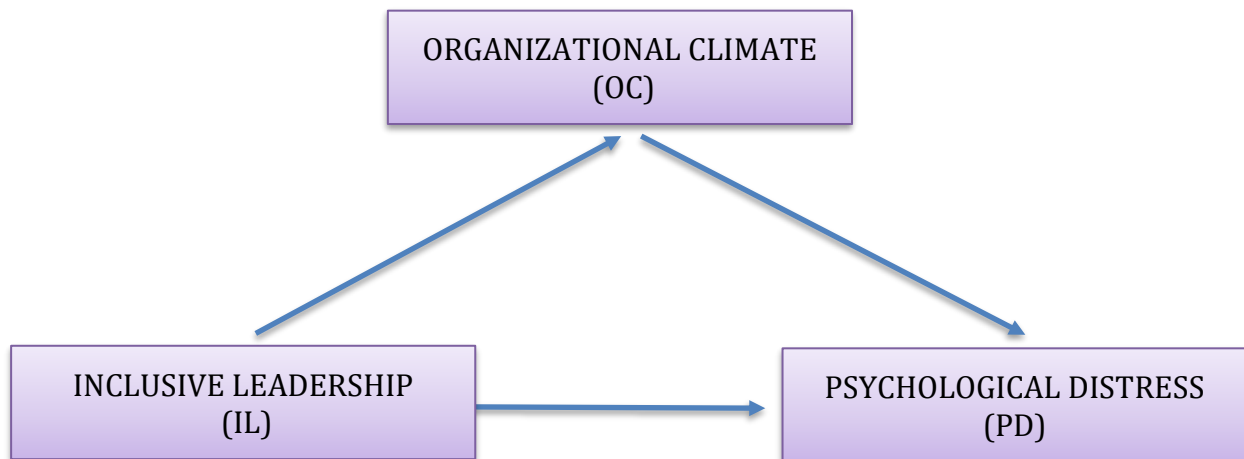
RQ4: Does (OC) has a significant and direct effect on (PD)?



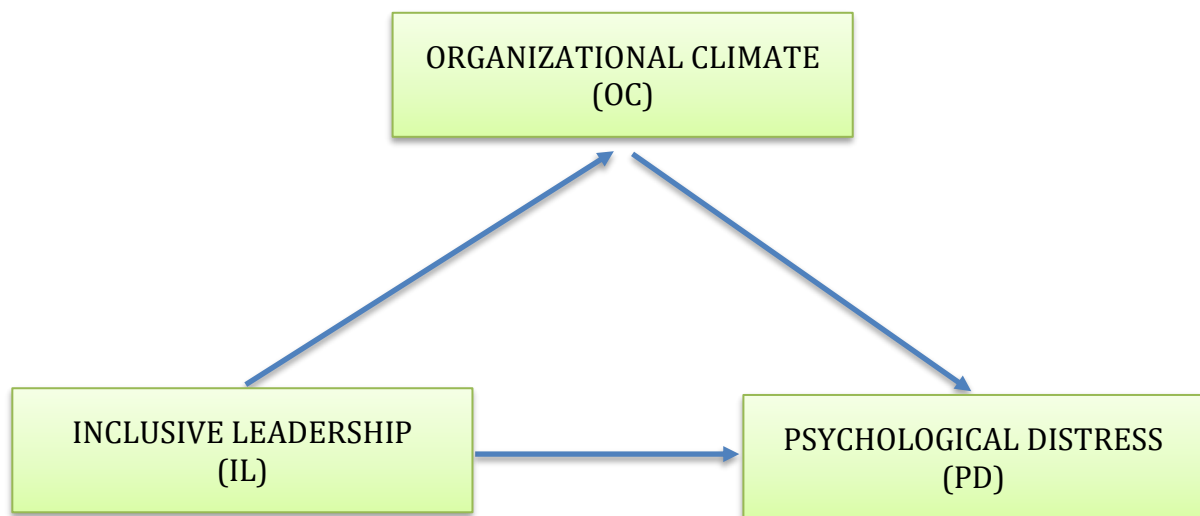
RQ5: Does (Si) has a significant and direct effect on (PD)?

While in the [Figure 3](#), is also a breakdown of the theoretical framework. Two (2) constructs play as mediators that exist in the relationship between Inclusive Leadership (IL) and Psychological distress (PD) i.e. Organizational Climate (OC) and Social Intelligence (SI). The mediators' functions are to control and facilitate the relationship between the two construct that are directly associated. They are also to be said the cause of the relationship between the two (2) constructs as shown in the figures below.

Figure 3: Mediating constructs relationship



RQ6: Does (OC) has significantly mediated the relationship between (IL) and (PD)?



RQ7: Does (SI) has significantly mediated the relationship between (IL) and (PD)?

4. Discussion

In the theoretical framework diagram above, there are four Variables. First is Inclusive leadership as an Independent or Exogenous construct. Three (3) Dependent or Endogenous constructs, Psychological Distress, Organizational Climate and Social Intelligence, form the framework. In the diagram, Inclusive Leadership links to Psychological Distress. This relationship shows a causal effect study. In other words, Inclusive leadership to examine if it affects Psychological Distress. Likewise, the relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Organizational climate and Social Intelligence. Single-headed arrow points to both variables. The relationship between

Organizational Climate and Psychological Distress showed with a single-headed arrow between two assumed to have positive relationships. The relationship between Social Intelligence and Psychological distress connects by a similar single-headed to the other. This design seems to have two small models in one model. With the sophistication of today's software, the relationship between variables can measure simultaneously.

This model could measure broadly, but in this article, the theoretical framework of the discussion revolves around research objectives and hypotheses. This theoretical framework has three (3) research objectives to achieve. The first is to check the significant relationship between the variables in the proposed research model. The second is to investigate the function of the mediator variables as Organizational Climate and Social Intelligence on the direct relationship between Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Distress. The third is about leadership and knowledge of management during crises and universal social problems need to anticipate properly. In terms of space and time, only seven (7) hypotheses extract from the theoretical framework. 1. Inclusive Leadership (IL) has a significant and direct effect on Psychological Distress (PD). 2. Inclusive Leadership (IL) has a significant and direct effect on Organizational Climate (OC). 3. Inclusive Leadership (IL) has a significant and direct effect on Social Intelligence (SI). 4. Organizational Climate (OC) has a significant and direct effect on Psychological Distress (PD). 5. Social Intelligence (SI) has a significant and direct effect on Psychological Distress (PD). 6. Organizational Climate (OC) has significantly mediated the relationship between (IL) and (PD). 7. Social Intelligence (SI) has significantly mediated the relationship between (IL) and (PD). Based on the goal and assumptions, the theoretical framework provides a better understanding of the advantage of Inclusive leadership to the organizations' leaders and the psychological well-being of employees preserved.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive leadership is a leader who promotes an inclusive approach to managing organizations. A leader encourages the involvement of all members in managing the organization. Apart from that, he invited everyone to contribute ideas to improve the management system. This kind of approach indirectly creates a work environment suited to be inhabited. A good environment encourages communication between all parties and collaborative work. In this way, it will strengthen the bond among members in parallel with the leader's attitude and stance on "People Leader", who portrays himself as open, accessible, and available. Attention to subordinates is something that we rarely heard of among leaders in the past despite being highly educated. Many are victims of harassment and bullying that can cause workers to feel stressed, depressed and afraid. There is not much that unravels the relationship between leaders and subordinates. The most often written is about the success of a leader compared to the success of employees led by a great leader. In the face of rapid change, this theory takes social intelligence as one of the efforts to face social conflict in the workplace. Social intelligence can be learned and is very useful in challenging life.

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