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Examination of Avoidable and Unavoidable Turnover

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Dalton, Krackhardt, and Porter (1981) suggested that examining avoidable and unavoidable turnover could improve understanding and prediction of turnover. Unavoidable leavers and stayers in the current study were found to be no different from each other, whereas both groups were significantly different from avoidable leavers on levels of satisfaction, organizational commitment, job tension, and withdrawal cognitions.

Researchers are more and more disillusioned with traditional approaches to examining the turnover phenomenon. Past reviews of the concept (i.e., Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979), as well as multivariate studies (Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Michaels & Spector, 1982), conclude that models using individual characteristics and attitudinal variables are limited in predicting and explaining why people leave organizations. Models using these variables account for, at most, 20% of the statistical turnover variance.

One reason for this inability to better explain turnover may rest in the methodology used to examine the relationships. The traditional turnover taxonomy assumes that people leave organizations for voluntary or involuntary reasons (Bluedorn, 1978; Price, 1977). Those who leave for involuntary reasons (see Figure 1, Blocks B3 and B4) are excluded from analysis. Research used to guide turnover theory development has done so, therefore, by treating all voluntary leavers as being similar. Researchers may be willing to state that there are potential differences among those who leave voluntarily, but no empirical evidence has yet suggested that better refining the criterion turnover variable itself may increase our understanding of turnover or our ability to predict it.

Dalton, Krackhardt, and Porter (1981) presented a taxonomy that more clearly defined turnover. They suggested that a taxonomy that distinguishes avoidable (see Figure 1, Block A1) from unavoidable (see Figure 1, Block A2) voluntary turnover may improve "our understanding of the manner in which actual withdrawal decisions are made . . . [and] provide a partial explanation for the ordinarily low association between voluntary turnover and its suspected antecedents and determinants" (p. 721).

Although empirical examinations of the taxonomy suggested by Dalton et al. (1981) have not been reported, their comments suggest that those who leave for organizationally avoidable reasons are different from both stayers and those who leave for organizationally unavoidable reasons. Furthermore, this suggests that most unavoidable leavers differ little, if any, from stayers. The definition of the turnover criterion measure itself, therefore, differs, depending on whether the traditional or expanded taxonomy is used. Although the traditional approach to examining turnover suggests that differences between stayers and all voluntary leavers are at issue, the expanded taxonomy suggests that further differentiating voluntary turnover as avoidable and unavoidable could be useful.

Hypothesized Relationships

Several hypotheses are generated to determine which turnover taxonomy is most appropriate. It is hypothesized that stayers are generally more like unavoidable leavers than avoidable leavers. The expanded taxonomy suggests that withdrawal cognitions such as thinking of quitting, intent to search, probability of finding an acceptable job elsewhere, and intent to leave are lower for stayers and unavoidable leavers than for avoidable leavers. Research that examined the relationships between withdrawal cognitions and the traditional turnover variable suggested this directionality (Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Michaels & Spector, 1982; Mobley, Horner, & Hollingsworth, 1978).

Affective responses and job-relevant perceptions for avoidable leavers are also hypothesized to be different from both stayers and unavoidable leavers. Stayers and unavoidable leavers should be more satisfied and committed and should experience less job tension than avoidable leavers (Ferris & Aranya, 1983; Mobley et al. 1979; Porter & Steers, 1973). Furthermore, significant relationships between turnover and supervisors who use their power to help employees solve work problems (Graen & Ginsberg, 1977; Sheridan, Vredenburgh, & Abelson, 1984) are hypothesized to also support the expanded taxonomy. Avoidable leavers are therefore hypothesized to experience their leader's behavior in a more negative light than do stayers or those leaving for unavoidable reasons.

Individual characteristics are the final set of variables examined in this study. The expanded taxonomy suggests that stayers and unavoidable leavers are older and more tenured than avoidable leavers. Unavoidable leavers, however, are hypothesized to be married and have more children needing care if ill than do avoidable leavers or stayers.

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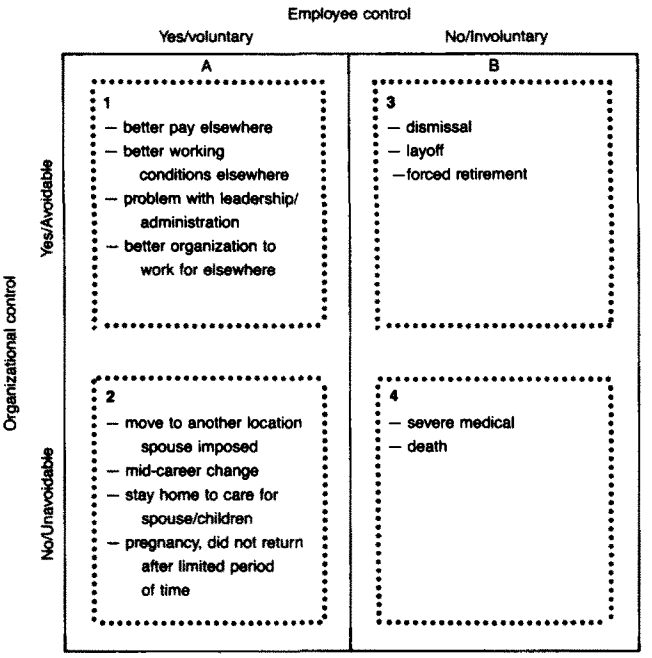

Figure 1. Expanded avoidability taxonomy.

Method

Sample

Nursing personnel from five nursing homes located in rural settings, with similar job market and economic conditions, were involved in the study. The nursing homes ranged in size from 120 to 242 beds. A total of 191 registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nursing aides completed questionnaires. Nursing staff members were scheduled by the director of nursing in each home to complete the questionnaire. They reported to a separate room during work hours and were allowed approximately 1 hr to complete the questionnaire. More than 95% of the staff working during questionnaire administration completed useable questionnaires. Of the 191 nursing staff in the sample, 136 remained employed and 55 left (9 left involuntarily, 30 left for avoidable reasons, and 16 left for unavoidable reasons) within 1 year of administration of the questionnaire. The annual turnover rate for all leavers was 29%. Those leaving for involuntary reasons were excluded from the analysis.

Measurement

Individual characteristics. Single-item scales were used for each of the variables. Age was in number of years. Tenure was in months functioning in their present job. Marital status was coded 0 if subjects were (currently) not married and 1 if they were (currently) married. The fourth variable was number of children school age or below who were currently living with the nurse and who would need personal care if they were ill.

Affective and job relevant perceptions. General satisfaction was measured by the Job Satisfaction Index (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951). Commitment was measured with a scale similar to that developed by Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972), and was conceptualized as an exchange in which employees compare aspects of their current job with aspects of jobs of their significant others. This approach was chosen instead of the psychological commitment approach (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) because of its conceptual similarity to the attraction-expected utility values concept hypothesized by Mobley et al. (1979) to immediately precede withdrawal cognitions. Ferris and Aranya (1983) found that neither approach was better able to predict actual turnover decisions. Job tension was measured using the Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) 15-item scale. All three scales have frequently been used with nursing groups and are highly reliable (coincidentally, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability for each scale was .86).

Supervisory style variables were adapted from Kruse and Stogdill (1973). Leader assertiveness was a six-item scale measuring nurses' perceptions of their head nurse's use of formal power to handle disturbances and solve staff problems (α = .75). Leader sensitivity was the other six-item scale and measured the extent the head nurse showed consideration for the nurse's feelings and maintained good interpersonal relations with staff members (α = .83).

Withdrawal cognitions. Four single-item withdrawal cognition variables were used. These measures were identical to the one-item scales used by Mobley et al. (1978). The variables were "thinking of quitting," "intent to search," "probability of finding an acceptable job with another employer," and "intent to leave."

Turnover. Turnover was collected for 1 year and was grouped into three categories; stayers, unavoidable leavers, and avoidable leavers. Reasons for leaving were obtained from the director of nursing at each nursing home, and not from employee records. Mowday (1981) noted that there may be some attributional effects of asking nursing directors why staff left, but the nursing homes were small enough for directors of nursing services to have more accurate knowledge of why staff left than was available from company records. Furthermore, the researcher had a good rapport with the directors and was independent of the corporation, which suggested that information received from nursing directors was probably superior to corporate records even with the attributional shortcomings. In situations in which nursing directors were not sure of employees' reasons for leaving, the researcher validated reasons with nursing staff members who had previously worked with the departed staff. Examples of actual reasons for leaving used in this study are reported in Figure 1.

Determining whether reasons were avoidable or unavoidable is a complex process. Reasons given by Dalton et al. (1981), and discussions with nursing directors, were used as guidelines to determine whether turnovers were avoidable or unavoidable. The researcher did not have an opportunity to directly ask those leaving if the organization could have prevented their turnover with some reasonable action. This should be taken into consideration when examining the results.

Statistical Analysis

Means and standard deviations are calculated for the variables examined in the study. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) is performed to determine the proportion of dispersion of all of the dependent variables accounting for stayers, avoidable leavers, and unavoidable leavers. Following Spector's (1977) and others (Finn, 1974; Klecka, 1980; Tatsuoka, 1970) suggestions, univariate F values are computed to examine the hypothesized relationships, followed by a multivariate discriminant analysis to more closely examine prediction and classification. The Behrens-Fisher method of multiple comparisons suggested by Games and Howell (1976) is used to compare means across stayers, unavoidable leavers, and avoidable leavers when the univariate F tests are significant. This method is used because it adjusts for familywise rate of Type I errors and is approximate even when cell sizes and variances are unequal.

A multiple discriminant analysis is performed to determine which of the variables best predict membership in the stayers, unavoidable leavers, and avoidable leavers groups. The direct method and not the stepwise method is used inasmuch as the stepwise method assumes theoretical justification for the order of variable entry (Tatsuoka, 1970), and no

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Post Hoc Significance Tests for Classification Group Scores

Variable	Stayers (S)		Unavoidable leavers (UNA)		Avoidable leavers (A)		Behrens-Fisher
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Age	34.6	12.5	33.1	11.7	29.5	10.1	*ns*
Job tenure	45.1	50.6	36.2	39.3	31.3	40.2	*ns*
Marital status	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.5	*ns*
Number of children needing care if ill	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.8	*ns*
Overall satisfaction	5.1	0.9	5.1	0.9	4.5	1.1	A < UNA, A < S, S = UNA
Organizational commitment	4.5	1.4	4.3	1.3	3.8	1.3	A < UNA, A < S, S = UNA
Job tension	2.5	0.9	2.9	1.0	3.0	0.9	A > S, A = UNA, S = UNA
Leader assertiveness	5.3	0.8	5.3	0.9	5.3	0.7	*ns*
Leader sensitivity	5.3	1.3	5.5	1.0	4.8	1.3	*ns*
Thinking of quitting	2.5	1.7	2.3	1.6	4.3	1.9	A > UNA, A > S, S = UNA
Intent to search	3.2	2.1	3.4	2.3	5.3	1.9	A > UNA, A > S, S = UNA
Probability of finding an acceptable alternative job	5.4	1.5	5.2	2.0	5.4	1.4	*ns*
Intent to leave	2.4	1.5	3.0	2.1	4.8	1.9	A > UNA, A > S, S = UNA

such theoretical rationale for ordering is appropriate. A cross validation of the discriminant analysis is not performed because groups must have at least as many cases as discriminant variables (Tatsuoka, 1970), and a holdout sample used in the validation would create a violation of this assumption. (There were only a total of 16 unavoidable leavers and 13 discriminant variables.)

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the variables. The one-way MANOVA was highly significant (Wilks's lambda = .634), $F(28) = 2.94$, $p < .001$. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) results, however, demonstrate no significant difference on mean scores between stayers, unavoidable leavers, and avoidable leavers on seven variables. This occurred with the four individual characteristic variables, both supervisory style variables, and staff's impressions of the probability of finding an acceptable alternative job. These variables were, therefore, not beneficial in determining whether the traditional or expanded taxonomy of turnover was the most useful in better understanding turnover.

Significant differences were found among the groups for each of the three perceptual and attitudinal variables and three of the four withdrawal cognition variables. As hypothesized, overall satisfaction, $F(2, 179) = 3.88$, $p < .05$, exchange commitment, $F(2, 179) = 3.4$, $p < .05$, and job tension, $F(2, 179) = 3.49$, $p < .05$, were different across groups. The Behrens-Fisher post hoc multiple comparisons test showed that avoidable leavers were less satisfied than those who left for unavoidable reasons ($p < .05$) and those who stayed ($p < .05$), and that stayers were no different from unavoidable leavers on levels of satisfaction. Moreover, avoidable leavers were less committed to the organization than those who left for unavoidable reasons ($p < .05$) or stayed ($p < .05$), and there were no differences between stayers and unavoidable leavers on commitment levels. Finally, job tension was significantly greater ($p < .05$) for avoidable leavers than for stayers, but no significant differences occurred between unavoidable leavers and avoidable leavers or stayers.

Thinking of quitting, $F(2, 179) = 10.6$, $p < .001$, intent to search, $F(2, 179) = 9.98$, $p < .001$, and intent to leave, $F(2, 179) = 24.5$, $p < .001$, were significantly different across groups. For each of these, avoidable leavers scored higher on withdrawal cognitions than did unavoidable leavers ($p < .05$) or stayers ($p < .05$). Stayers perceived withdrawal cognitions no differently than did unavoidable leavers.

An interesting trend emerged. The attitudes and withdrawal cognitions of those leaving for avoidable reasons were very different from those who left for unavoidable reasons or stayed. Avoidable leavers were less satisfied and committed and experienced greater job tension and withdrawal cognitions than did unavoidable leavers or stayers.

There were no significant differences, however, regarding individual characteristics or leader behavior perceptions. A closer examination of the means demonstrates that stayers and unavoidable leavers tended to be older than avoidable leavers, but not significantly so. Stayers and unavoidable leavers also tended to have greater tenure than did avoidable leavers. Although these relationships were not statistically significant, trends consistent with the hypothesized relationships did emerge. Further study may find relationships in the predicted direction. Family responsibility and leader behavior perceptions showed little difference across groups. The expanded taxonomy, or at least this examination of it, helps little in explaining earlier contradictory findings regarding these relationships with turnover (Mobley et al., 1979; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Waters, Roach, & Waters, 1976).

Function 1 of the discriminant analysis was highly significant and explained 84.1% of the common variance. This function was composed most significantly by three of the four withdrawal cognition variables and then by satisfaction, commitment, and job tension. A second function was not statistically significant. The analysis discriminated avoidable leavers (group centroid = −1.33) from both stayers (group centroid = .27) and unavoidable leavers (group centroid = .22). Unavoidable leavers were no different from stayers. This analysis supported the

hypothesis that the expanded taxonomy is a more appropriate turnover taxonomy.

The overall hit rate of the discriminant analysis is 80.2%; 71% of the employees actually remained. The discriminant analysis classified over 96% of the stayers accurately. Only 16% of the employees were avoidable leavers, and more than 43% of these were predicted accurately. The 9% who were unavoidable leavers were predicted accurately only 12% of the time. Most of the unavoidable leavers were inaccurately predicted to be stayers. This result further demonstrates the similarity between unavoidable leavers and stayers, giving added evidence for the expanded taxonomy.

Furthermore, these results are consistent with a postdecision justification effect. People who intend to quit and who have no external reason for explaining their quitting (avoidable leavers) may, in some cases, be modifying their attitudes and intentions to be consistent with their behavior. People who do have an external reason may not feel they have to modify their attitudes to be consistent with their behavior.

There is another possible explanation for why avoidable leavers were not better predicted (43% hit rate). Had different predictor variables been included in the analysis, such as those suggested by Mobley et al. (1979) and Steers and Mowday (1981), avoidable turnover may have been better predicted. This suggests that types of predictor variables typically examined may be as much to blame for the poor ability to predict turnover as is the lack of criterion variable precision.

Because of the inability to cross validate the results of the discriminant function classification and prediction rates, another analytic approach was used to determine the extent the avoidability taxonomy may improve prediction. A multiple regression analysis was performed using the 13 variables in the study to predict turnover. This analysis was performed using the conventional all-leavers and all-stayers approach (n = 182) and the avoidability taxonomy approach (excluding unavoidable leavers, n = 165). The adjusted R^2 for the traditional approach was .19. This is comparable with that reported by Arnold and Feldman (1982) and Michaels and Spector (1982), who both used a set of variables similar to that used in this study. When the avoidability taxonomy was used, the adjusted R^2 increased to .30. The same variables now accounted for over 50% more turnover variance just by excluding unavoidable leavers from the analysis. Another regression analysis, entering the predictor variables first and then a dummy-coded avoidable and unavoidable turnover variable, was performed. The dummy variable was highly significant, $F(1, 180) = 96.7$, $p < .001$, and so was the change in variance accounted for (R^2 change = .29). This latter analysis also suggests that the distinction between avoidable and unavoidable turnover is important.

Summary and Conclusion

The expanded taxonomy appears to give a more precise indication of the relation between frequently studied individual level variables and turnover than does the traditional taxonomy. First, the ANOVA and discriminant analysis demonstrated that there were no differences between stayers and unavoidable leavers for any variables studied. Second, levels of satisfaction, organizational commitment, job tension, and three of the four withdrawal cognitions differentiated stayers and unavoidable leavers from avoidable leavers. Researchers who treat unavoidable leavers similarly to avoidable leavers may, because of methodology, be spuriously affecting their results. Practitioners using this information during in-house surveys may arrive at erroneous conclusions and take inappropriate actions. These outcomes will be affected to the extent that the firm has unavoidable turnover. Those firms with high percentages of dual-career employees, highly fluctuating economic environments (the grass is greener somewhere else in good times phenomenon), or minimally educated staff who may desire to return to school to improve their employment opportunities, may be more susceptible to spurious interpretations if the traditional and not the expanded taxonomy is used. The variables to focus on then when differentiating avoidable from unavoidable leavers seem to be the affective and withdrawal cognition variables. Age and tenure of stayers were higher, but not statistically significantly so in relation to avoidable and unavoidable leavers. There were no differences at all between the three categories for either of the family responsibility variables.

The findings presented in this article suggest that those researchers examining turnover, either in a research or an applied setting, should at least determine whether their data differentiates stayers and unavoidable leavers from unavoidable leavers on the variables of interest. If unavoidable and avoidable turnovers respond to the variables differently, there is a need to segment these different leaver categories when progressing further. Following this analytical approach will prompt us to compare our conceptual suspicions with the "reality" of the situation. More accurate theory building and application are a likely result.

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Schmitt Appointed Editor, 1989–1994

The Publications and Communications Board of the American Psychological Association announces the appointment of Neal Schmitt, Michigan State University, as editor of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* for a 6-year term beginning in 1989. As of January 1, 1988, manuscripts should be directed to

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Manuscript submission patterns for the *Journal of Applied Psychology* make the precise date of completion of the 1988 volume uncertain. The current editor, Robert Guion, will receive and consider manuscripts until December 31, 1987. Should the 1988 volume be completed before that date, manuscripts will be redirected to Schmitt for consideration in the 1989 volume.