COMMENT


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Hom, Mitchell, Lee, and Griffeth (2012) presented an extensive review of employee turnover research, reconceptualized the turnover criterion to include multiple destinations, and proposed to expand the predictor domain. They illuminated the multiple destinations employees pursue following turnover. By crossing desire to remain and volitional control dimensions, Hom et al. defined and described 4 withdrawal states (or predeparture mind-sets). This commentary begins by introducing the issue that people do not know precisely where they will turn over to until they have actually gone. This suggests that researchers should consider anticipated destinations when conducting research on withdrawal states.

We note the limitations of measuring withdrawal states as taxonomic categories; instead, we advocate for measuring the underlying continuous dimensions of desire and control or the weight associated with the pressures to leave or stay. Finally, we highlight some temporal considerations, as withdrawal states are temporary and there is much to be learned from studying changes in such states. We conclude with some directions for future turnover research based on Hom et al.’s contribution.

Keywords: employee turnover, withdrawal states, predeparture mind-sets, post-exit destinations

Hom, Mitchell, Lee, and Griffeth (2012) provided a relatively comprehensive summary of the vast literature on employee turnover, summarizing the major findings and all the ways this research has contributed to our efforts to more accurately describe organizational turnover, operationalize it, and ultimately predict it. They provided a useful review of the turnover literature for anyone trying to get up to speed on this domain. Correspondingly, we envision recommending the article to students in preparation for comprehensive exams and to colleagues as they embark on turnover-related projects.

Combining all the predictors identified and lessons learned from the thousands of studies that have examined employee turnover, Hom et al. (2012) attempted to integrate this sometimes fragmented literature into one overall explanatory model, proposing (a) that turnover can be better understood if one knows precisely where people turn over and (b) that turnover is preceded by proximal withdrawal states (also called predeparture mind-sets) that cross desire and control dimensions. In the following commentary, we react to this proposed direction for turnover research and identify some temporal issues that need further consideration.

Expanding and Refining Turnover Criterion to Include Multiple Destinations

One of the primary contributions of Hom et al. (2012) was to list the wide range of possible destinations to which employees may “turn over.” By doing so, Hom et al. simultaneously expanded and refined our conceptualization of turnover criterion. They expanded the criterion by including the historically omitted involuntary quitters and refined it by proposing it includes approximately 10 destinations (see their Table 1). Thus, they created a more fine-grained description of turnover than the dichotomous turnover criterion (i.e., stay/leave) or even common operationalizations of the voluntariness of turnover as either employee initiated or not (e.g., Campion, 1991). However, we have two general concerns about using destinations as the turnover criterion, although we acknowledge that using the dichotomous criterion is probably worse. Essentially, one does not arrive at a new destination until one leaves the current employment situation. During her or his time at an organization, an employee might believe and expect that she or he will be leaving for a particular destination, but that opportunity might never materialize or the employee might leave for a different reason. For example, a person might anticipate working for a year until she or he enters law school. But if the person is not admitted to law school, then the expectations—and the attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors that go along with them—will not be aligned with the person’s actual destination. Similarly, a person can be laid off due to an economic downturn, but until that time the person could be engaged in organizational life. Therefore, the cognitions, affect, and behavior before leaving the organization might be disconnected from the destination to which the person actually goes.
because the cognitions, affect, and behavior actually align with the destination to which the person expected to go. That is, if the goal is to understand and predict workplace attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions, it is more important to know people’s anticipated destinations than their actual destinations.

Our second concern is that (anticipated) destinations tell us something about turnover decision processes, but they are not substitutable for many of the traditional dimensions that we examine (e.g., voluntariness, functionality, avoidability) because, as can be seen in Table 1 of Hom et al. (2012), very different mind-sets can cause people to end up at the same destination. For example, some people choose to stay home with their children rather than work because they want to parent without also working. Other people stay home with their children because it is financially more viable to have the parent providing the daily care instead of working and paying the day-care bills. Others stay home with their children because they lack interest in the job that they had or cannot find a position, not because they are especially drawn to being a stay-at-home parent. In the next few paragraphs, we briefly review some of these traditional dimensions and explain why we believe they are still important to measure in the turnover research.

Dimensions of Turnover

Hom et al. (2012) pointed out that the operationalization of voluntariness of turnover is a problem due to inaccurate recording by human resources managers (Campion, 1991). We agree. However, it is important to remember that difficulty in obtaining accurate records of voluntariness is not a reason to stop considering the voluntariness of turnover. Instead, it is an impetus to reconsider how turnover data are collected, both the sources of the data and the nature of the questions asked. Thus, we suggest obtaining self-reports of the employee’s control over leaving/staying, which should be a more accurate assessment of employees’ volition over their turnover (e.g., Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994). In fact and a bit ironically, Hom et al. advocated for measuring voluntariness to validate and demonstrate the predictive validity of the proposed mind-sets.

Hom et al. (2012) discounted the importance of turnover functionality, which captures the extent to which turnover is “good” for the organization, and turnover avoidability, which captures organizational control rather than employee control over the turnover (Griffeth & Hom, 2001). We caution researchers from completely discarding these dimensions, as they are still ultimately important and meaningful ways to construe and categorize turnover that offer critical practical information for organizations. In fact, in a way they capture the organization’s desire and control (March & Simon, 1958). Thus, an even richer way to conceptualize turnover would be to include both the employee’s and the organization’s levels of desire for the employee to leave and control over his or her leaving. This could be expanded upon further by including important constituents (e.g., spouse, child, parent, supervisor, customer) and their desire and control over an employee’s turnover (Bhattacharya, 2008). Further, the avoidability dimension suggests different psychological processes and thus expanded theoretical insight on turnover decisions. The avoidability of turnover is likely to be related to, but distinct from, the enthusiasm and reluctance of leavers.

Finally, Campion (1991) identified reasons for turnover from personnel files and surveys of former employees and their supervisors. He found nearly 20 distinct reasons why people engage in turnover. Examining reasons, rather than categorical mind-sets, might be a more fruitful direction for research on turnover and turnover destinations because the categorical mind-sets (like all type theories) do not capture the rich variation in people’s reasons for leaving. The complex landscape provided by examining the conjoint reasons for leaving versus staying should provide a more nuanced picture of turnover behavior.

This argument is not to suggest that organizations and organizational scientists should not study turnover destinations. Instead, our point is that destinations are not a panacea but rather constitute a more fine-grained parcel of information. Understanding the locations where people turn over is of critical importance if the goal is to understand whether and when interventions are possible. Organizations will try to retain those people who are performing well and are turning over to a job in a different organization. Essentially, if a person is finding a replacement job, then this was a bad result for the organization. Also, changes in one’s person life (e.g., birth of a baby) can be accommodated with reduced workloads (e.g., job sharing) or alternative work schedules (e.g., flextime), allowing the retention of high performers. Further, if an employee takes a promotion in another organization, then the career development ladder has failed in this organization. Because of the caveats we acknowledged above, destinations are not a perfect way of thinking about these issues, but they are an improvement over the traditional dichotomous criterion.

Additional Criterion Considerations

We also considered two possible boundary conditions on the framework described by Hom et al. (2012). First is internal turnover (i.e., transfer) within an organization (Stewman & Konda, 1983). There are numerous dimensions to transfers, including the direction of the move (i.e., promotion, demotion, lateral move), the transfer location (e.g., to a different site within the same organization, within the same site but a different organizational reporting line, within the same site and the same organizational reporting line). We wonder whether someone who enthusiastically accepts a promotion is an enthusiastic leaver or an enthusiastic stayer in the framework of Hom et al.

It is also important to recognize that even if the employment relationship with the organization is terminated, the worker does not necessarily leave the organization; some individuals turn over but are rehired under different employment conditions (e.g., contractor). Such cases are not transfers or internal turnover, as the employment relationship is terminated, but the psychological experience of the turnover for the focal person and colleagues is likely to be different than it is for those individuals who terminate employment and take up work or other activities elsewhere.

Another complexity to turnover research that warrants attention is that many people have multiple jobs. Certainly, thousands of

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Footnote 1

Throughout the focal article, Hom et al. used the phrase full-time parenting to refer to parents who choose not to work. All parents are full-time parents regardless of their employment status. Correspondingly, we prefer not to use this phrase.
people maintain more than one job at a time; thus they may simply leave one organization but maintain employment at the other. In some ways, this issue is irrelevant for the model described, as a person can leave Job A and maintain employment in Job B, whether leaving Job A means expanding one’s time/commitment to Job B or using that time to do other activities (e.g., being home with children after school). However, the economic, familial, intra-individual, and social pressures that come to bear on a person deciding between having two jobs and having only one of those two jobs are probably different from those that come to bear on the person deciding between the current job and a different destination.

Withdrawal States

A second major goal of Hom et al. (2012) was to introduce a new antecedent construct for turnover: proximal withdrawal states. They did not claim to be the first to investigate withdrawal states, as the intention to quit is a withdrawal cognition—which has been examined in the literature since Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) theory of reasoned action (see also Ajzen, 1991). However, Hom et al. claimed (a) that their withdrawal states improve on the classical intention to quit because withdrawal states account for both employees’ desire to stay or leave and employees’ perceived control over staying versus leaving; and (b) that they do not include withdrawal cognitions as part of the turnover criterion but rather as an antecedent of the cognition. We address each of these issues in turn.

Improved Withdrawal States Constructs

Hom et al. (2012) defined four withdrawal states by crossing employee desire to leave/stay with employee control over leaving/staying. They referred to these states as enthusiastic stayers, reluctant stayers, enthusiastic leavers, and reluctant leavers. Although they also identified subclasses of individuals within each of these states, we caution researchers from limiting their conceptualization and measurement of turnover to this typology. Recognizing the multiple motives for turning over, turnover researchers have been advocating for continuous measures of turnover for some time (e.g., Campion, 1991).

Further, turnover researchers have long acknowledged the importance of employee desire to leave and control over doing so. March and Simon (1958) identified desirability and ease of movement as two critical antecedents of employee turnover. One important difference in how these predictors are conceptualized, however, is that some researchers conceptualized ease of movement as a moderator of the desire to leave–turnover relationship (e.g., Price, 1977). Hom et al. (2012) appear to have conceptualized desire and control as equally important predictors. In some ways they have reconceptualized job embeddedness as a state in which an employee has a strong desire to stay and a high level of control (rather than lack of control) over leaving.

Hom et al. (2012) assumed that people generally embody a single mind-set at any one time. That is, the mind-sets are generally seen as a typology rather than a set of continua (which is in contrast with Meyer and Herscovitch’s 2001 work, from which the “mind-set” notion is borrowed). However, it seems likely that people can embody multiple mind-sets. For example, a pregnant woman could be enthusiastic about her job but also enthusiastic about taking a year’s leave of absence to care for her newborn child. This simple example calls into question the fundamental nature of these mind-sets of enthusiastic stayer, enthusiastic leaver, reluctant stayer, and reluctant leaver. Notably, is a typology really what Hom et al. meant to suggest? Rarely do typologies capture the complex and multifaceted experiences of people (Cohen, 1983). Further, numerous variables underlie typologies; these variables can often be measured continuously, allowing subtle differences between people to be accounted for (Fralen & Waller, 1998). Additionally, people rarely fit the prototype of a category, instead being assigned to categories based on best fit rather than perfect fit.

Withdrawal Cognitions Have Always Been Antecedents of Turnover

Hom et al. (2012) claimed to reclassify immediate cognitions preceding leaving as antecedents rather than part of the criterion space. Based on the theory of reasoned action/theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), withdrawal cognitions and turnover intentions have always been conceptualized as antecedents of turnover. Whereas it is true that many researchers have limited their investigations to the prediction of turnover intentions (e.g., Hom et al., 2009), such researchers are rarely only interested in predicting intentions. Instead, they choose to limit their investigation to turnover intentions because (a) it is much easier to collect this information from self-reports at the same time as they collect the predictor information; (b) they did not want to wait 6 months to 2 years, per best practice in turnover research (Steel, 2002), for turnover behavior data; and/or (c) they were unable to gather identified data, which limits linking predictor data to turnover behavior data from another source/time. In fact, we would argue that the biggest challenges to conducting turnover research are the need to wait an adequate amount of time for the data and the requirement that predictor information must contain identification information that can be used to subsequently link it to the criterion data.

We have observed that many researchers have misinterpreted or construed research on turnover intentions as turnover behavior research. However, errors in interpreting research should not discount the research itself. As Hom et al. (2012) pointed out in this regard, doing so ignores all the moderators of the turnover intentions–turnover behavior relationship (Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Thus we strongly urge researchers not to overinterpret their or others’ data on turnover intentions.

Alternatively, maybe we would be better off predicting turnover intentions rather than turnover behavior. Despite the moderators of the turnover intentions–turnover behavior relationship, turnover intentions and job search behavior are the best noneconomic predictors of turnover behavior (Griffeth et al., 2000). So, from an intervention standpoint, organizations have a better chance of changing behavior if they can intervene before the intentions manifest themselves. And, one’s quit cognitions certainly have implications for other workplace behavior (e.g., task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, motivation, loyalty). Hom et al. (2012) appear to suggest this, too, by advocating for studying and measuring withdrawal states. Regardless of which is measured (and, ideally, both would be), it is incumbent upon all researchers
to faithfully interpret their and others’ data, so that appropriate inferences can be made.

**Measurement of Withdrawal States**

Hom et al. (2012) claimed that withdrawal states or “mind-sets may lead to different turnover destinations” (p. 847), but as we noted above, it is the anticipated or desired destination—and not the actual destination—that would define and determine employees’ mind-sets because no one knows for certain where her or his actual destination will be. Thus, at a minimum we would recommend adding anticipated/desired destination (or destination intent) as a predictor of withdrawals states in Figure 1 of Hom et al. However, it might be more useful to examine the pressures from within the organization, from outside the organization, and from the employees themselves that encourage staying or leaving. The result of the various forces that are pushing and pulling people into and out of the organization should be the primary determinant of the proximal withdrawal state. Importantly, these four categories could be derived via different combinations of push–pull from the various constituencies. For example, the organization might be pulling the person into the job but family pressures could be pulling the person out, which could result in reluctant staying or reluctant leaving, depending on the total strength of each force. However, the organization could be pushing the person out and family pressures could pull the person out, yet because there are contractual obligations, the person could still be a reluctant stayer. The pressures from the various constituencies might be a better predictor of turnover than the four withdrawal states identified by Hom et al. In addition, the weight employees ascribe to these pressures is likely to play an important role.

**Temporal Considerations**

One irony we observed is that Hom et al. (2012) claimed to have focused on temporal states, yet they conceptualized these states as categories rather than temporary states on continua when they described each one of them in detail and depicted them as static in Table 1. Even the subtypes are categorical. Yet, employee turnover is a complex psychological process (Becker & Cropanzano, 2011; Mobley, 1982; Steel & Lounsbury, 2009). Although Hom et al. explicitly stated that they do not believe that withdrawal states are fixed, their treatment of withdrawal states suggests that people transition from being a stayer to a leaver at one time, and then they leave.

It is important to acknowledge that employees’ withdrawal state is temporary and can change at any time. Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) research on shocks illuminated how quickly an employee’s mind-set can change. Hom et al. (2012) depicted movement from one withdrawal state to another in their Figure 3; however, the process by which this happens was not fully described or articulated in the text. Correspondingly, there are many questions that remain to be answered. For example, what causes an enthusiastic leaver to become a stayer? That is, instead of asking what causes someone to transition from stayer to leaver, we wonder what causes people to transition from leaver to stayer. As another example, when does an enthusiastic stayer become an enthusiastic or reluctant leaver? Do people respond to shocks within a particular time frame? Do they activate plans following a shock, following a calendar date, or following a life event, or does it depend? As a third example, what causes changes from reluctance to enthusiasm for stayers and for leavers? None of these issues were well articulated by Hom et al.

Movement among the withdrawal states has implications for the temporal durations for leaving originally defined by Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, and Hill (1999). To the extent that employees contemplate and even decide to quit but then do not, they will have multiple time periods from shock or experienced dissatisfaction to quit decisions. That is, just because a person decides to leave at one point in time does not mean that the person cannot later decide to stay. This situation can be the case because new shocks or other information intervenes between a quit decision and actual quitting, causing the person to reevaluate his or her decision. For example, during a job search, employees might alter their standards or change their perspective, discovering that the grass is not necessarily greener on the other side. Alternatively, the organization could try to forestall leaving. In fact, research on the effectiveness of organizational retention interventions is sorely needed (Boswell, Boudreau, & Dunford, 2004). It is not uncommon for organizations to make accommodations in order to retain employees or to establish idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006), including counteroffers, job-sharing arrangements, bonuses, teleworking, and internal transfers. Research examining changes in withdrawals states may lead to interventions that organizations can pursue to retain their best employees.

The process of changing withdrawal states/mind-sets is also likely to have implications for consequent attitudes and behaviors (Kamhuyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005). Indeed, having moved from one withdrawal state to another is fundamentally different than existing in a particular withdrawal state. The process of change and the baggage (good or bad) one brings from psychological and situational experiences in prior withdrawal states are likely to foster unique perspectives and reactions to subsequent withdrawal states. Although this movement across withdrawal states was recognized by Hom et al. (2012), the “change” from one withdrawal state to another may itself suggest new and unique processes.

**Life Plans and Decision to Quit**

We agree that “no one stays with an organization forever” or everyone leaves eventually. However, what was overlooked by Hom et al. (2012) is that everyone knows this. Not just researchers—everyone. Some people might believe that they are going to be with the organization they enter for their lifetime, but even they might anticipate retiring and certainly should anticipate that they will die someday. Hom et al. (2012) acknowledged that many people “plan to stay for a set duration” (p. 845) at the organization and identified plans as one of the voluntary leaving subtype (see their Table 1), but the extent to which this is the case is understated.

People enter organizations with not just goals (i.e., idealized achievement steps that require action) but plans (i.e., a series of interlinked goals) for their lives. They have expectations about how their lives are going to go. People live their lives with a life story in mind, both retrospectively and prospectively (McAdams & Pals, 2006). That is, people make choices to be consistent with their pasts and make sense of their current decisions in reference to
their lives thus far. These plans are driven by values and idealized possible future selves, self-esteem, personality, and a host of other individual differences. Before people enter the organization, they have plans for how their life should be in 2, 5, 10, or even 50 years. Many people already have a sense of when they will leave the organization long before they enter it (e.g., Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005). These ideas can be tied to tenure (e.g., “I will stay in the military for two enlistment periods”) or to life events (e.g., “I will work until my first child is born”). Certainly, plans change: Promotions do not materialize; divorces happen; couples are infertile; applications are passed over; unexpected opportunities arise; organizations downsiz. But until they do, people live their lives as though what they expect to happen will in fact happen. Changes in plans could be caused by what are generally considered “shocks,” but these shocks do not have to cause people to create a quit decision. Shocks can make people stay.

Further, how do we know when a person has decided to leave? A decision is often a dichotomy—yes/no—or a selection of one from among many choices. People vary in their certainty about leaving. Some days they are absolutely sure that they want to go, others absolutely sure that they want to stay, and most somewhere in the middle. The concept of turnover intentions accounts for this state of affairs, as it is not a dichotomy but rather a Likert-type rating. So, what is the time frame for leaving between the decision to leave and actual leaving such that we can say, yes, that person decided to leave? On one hand, there are so many moderators (most notably, availability of alternative destination) that it is almost impossible to say that a person decided at a particular point in time, up until the leaving (or the turning in of a resignation letter, or the nonrenewal of a contract) is actually occurring. Such retrospective categorization of decisions makes their ability to predict future events moot. On the other hand, people decide long in advance of leaving, in accordance with their plans that they will leave. Must there be a specific shock to signal leaving? Must there be a specific alternative within a not-very-long time frame to count as the decision to leave? If the issue of when a decision to leave is the real decision to leave can be resolved only by retrospectively recalling decision processes following a turnover event, the utility of examining turnover decisions is zero.

Directions for Turnover Research

Despite the concerns outlined above, we believe that Hom et al. (2012) have set us on a good path in an effort to enhance the explanation and prediction of employee turnover. In our concluding comments, we briefly describe a few opportunities for research.

First, as we noted in several places above, research is needed on the measurement of withdrawal states. We suggested that researchers measure underlying dimensions such as control and desirability of staying/leaving, but researchers could also rate taxonomic categories or rank categories listed in Table 1 of Hom et al. (2012). These lead to some of the classic concerns that organizational scientists deal with in measurement research, such as the extent to which self-report measures of withdrawal states are sensitive to socially desirable responding and how long after departure such measures are valid for leavers (i.e., the retrospective recall problem). Further, it is possible to gather others’ reports of a focal person’s withdrawal states. But again, validity questions abound. How valid are other reports of withdrawal states? Does it depend on who the “other” is? Are the assessments more valid for leavers than stayers? Do other reports account for unique variance in turnover above and beyond self-reports?

Second, how much variance do withdrawal mind-sets account for? Griffeth et al. (2000) reported a .38 corrected correlation for the relationship between turnover intentions and turnover. Do withdrawal states account for more variance in employee turnover than turnover intention measures? How do they compare in predictive efficacy to commitment profiles (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Wasti, 2005)? We caution researchers against simultaneously changing the measurement of both the predictor (withdrawal states) and the criterion (i.e., include destinations), because it will be impossible to determine which led to any observed improvements in prediction.

Third, Hom et al. (2012) proposed that we can predict departure speed based on withdrawal mind-sets. Although it is unlikely we will ever be able to predict exact day and time of every departure, empirical research can reveal to what extent we can predict timing of turnover within a particular time frame. Hom et al. (2012) proposed that we can “forecast destinations more accurately for leavers than stayers” (p. 847). A priori, it seems that the multiplicity of destinations for the multiplicity of leavers allows for better predictability than the single destination (i.e., the current location) for the multiplicity of stayers.

Fourth, to what extent can organizations manipulate withdrawal states and move employees from reluctant stayers to enthusiastic stayers? The efficacy of specific organizational interventions (e.g., adopt “family-friendly” policies) can be tested using withdrawal states as one dependent variable (in addition to turnover). However, just as it is essential to distinguish between turnover research and turnover intention research, one must also be certain to distinguish between withdrawal states research and turnover/turnover intention research. It is incumbent upon both the researchers and the audience to recognize that turnover intentions and withdrawal states are related to but distinct from turnover itself.

Fifth, Hom et al.’s (2012) paper focused on withdrawal states as predictors of turnover. However, they sometimes described their work as motivation to participate. It is worth considering how far the notion of “motivation to participate” can be taken. For example, how well do withdrawal states predict nonwithdrawal outcomes (e.g., job performance, organizational citizenship behavior)? Hom et al. identified numerous relationships in their Table 1 that must be empirically tested. To the extent that they do relate to these outcomes, should they be reconceptualized as organizational participation states rather than withdrawal states?

Additionally, further research into the distal antecedents of turnover is needed. Among the most promising routes is organizational climate—that is, employees’ shared perceptions of the policies, procedures, and practices about a specific issue (e.g., safety, service) or what is tolerated and supported by norms and management (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Unhealthy organizational climates can have a strong influence on employees’ desire to leave (Ostroff et al., 2003). In fact, organizations can even have climates for turnover or short-term employment. Sometimes this is structural, such as militaries that depend on short-term enlistment periods (e.g., 4 years). However, other organizations, such as Big Four accounting firms,
some law firms, and high-technology companies, are known as great places to get your career started and then move on.

Finally, although the work here focuses on organizational turnover, we wonder whether this reconceptualization of turnover from organizations provides new insights into maintaining or leaving other relationships (e.g., marriages, corporate partnerships). For example, when a person leaves a romantic relationship (e.g., via divorce), are the reasons for leaving and the preceding withdrawal states different for those who leave for the single life versus those who leave for another partner?

In conclusion, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the article of Hom et al. (2012) and look forward to new insights gained as a result of the path they have put us on.

References


