# The Story of Why We Stay: A Review of Job Embeddedness

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## Abstract

In this article, we examine the history and development of job embeddedness, beginning with the story of the idea's conception, theoretical foundation, and original empirical structure as a major predictor of employee voluntary turnover. We then consider more recent expansions in the theoretical structure and empirical measurement of job embeddedness, exploring job embeddedness as a causal indicator model versus a reflective model. Next, we review some promising expansions of embeddedness to new domains (e.g., family embeddedness) as well as important contingency factors that enhance or diminish its impact. Finally, we describe how job embeddedness affects important organizational outcomes beyond turnover, including job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, innovation, and the development of social and human capital. Throughout the article, we provide our opinions on how the theory and research on embeddedness have progressed as well as ideas on how it can be improved.

## INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1995, Tom Lee, Terry Mitchell, and their colleagues at the University of Washington were revising a manuscript that reported a qualitative test of their unfolding model of voluntary turnover (which ultimately became Lee et al. 1996) and began planning a subsequent quantitative test of the model (which later became Lee et al. 1999). At that time, Miriam Erez visited the (now) Foster School of Business at Washington and joined the ongoing weekly conversations on turnover research. (See Lee & Mitchell 2011 for a description of these meetings.) During these discussions on voluntary employee turnover, Lee suggested that they consider a switch from their (then) five-year focus on the unfolding model of turnover, and the group responded positively. Over the next few months, the research group read and discussed numerous articles on the subject of involuntary turnover (along with several other topics). As a result of this process, Lee noted that conversations focused almost exclusively on the question, why do people leave? He asked whether it might be more interesting and useful to instead consider, why do people stay? Almost instantly, Mitchell commented that he had been at Washington since 1969, and Lee responded that he had been at Washington since 1983. In jest, Mitchell then said that they knew more about staying than leaving. Almost in the same breath, Mitchell added that he stayed at Foster because of fit or comfort with the University of Washington and city of Seattle, his many links to doctoral students and the community (e.g., his accumulating seniority with Seattle Seahawk season tickets), and the sacrifices that leaving entailed (e.g., forgoing the accumulated Washington- and Foster-specific human and social capital; hardships to his many doctoral students). At that moment, the construct of what was later to be known as job embeddedness was born.

Over the rest of the 1994–1995 academic year, during subsequent years, and amid conversations on the unfolding model in particular and employee turnover in general, Mitchell, Lee, Erez, and a host of doctoral students (particularly Brooks Holtom, who now may well be the most-published scholar on job embeddedness) continued the conversation on why employees stay (i.e., what causes them to be embedded in their jobs). In this article, we review the evolution of and research on the job embeddedness construct. More specifically, we address the general questions, what is it, where has it been, and where should it go? We do not offer a complete review, but we do strive for substantial depth, breadth, and informed speculation. Because our instructions are to produce a review "with an attitude," we are somewhat more assertive than usual in stating our opinions (though we may not be "guys-with-attitudes").

## WHAT IS JOB EMBEDDEDNESS?

Long ago, the conventional answer to the question of why people leave may well have been, because they don't like their jobs and have some place else to go. Correspondingly, the answer to the (seldom asked) question of why people stay may well have been the vacuous opposite of the reason for turnover, that is, because they like their jobs and don't have some place else to go. The primary explanations for staying were high (as opposed to low) levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement, which are concepts that dominated the turnover research for many years as well (Holtom et al. 2008).

In their deliberations, Mitchell and colleagues focused less on affect or affect-saturated constructs (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, or involvement) and more on contextual influences that affect staying. Specifically, Mitchell et al. (2001, p. 1104, emphasis in original) described job embeddedness as follows.

> Job embeddedness represents a broad constellation of influences on employee retention. Two research-related ideas that help explain the core of this construct are embedded figures and field

theory (Lewin, 1951). Embedded figures, which are images used in a psychological test, are immersed in their backgrounds. Attached to their backgrounds and hard to separate from them, embedded figures become part of the surroundings. Field theory presents a similar vision, the idea that people have a perceptual life space in which the aspects of their lives are represented and connected. These connections can be few or many and close or distant. Drawing on these ideas, we can describe job embeddedness as like a net or a web in which an individual can become stuck. One who is highly embedded has many links that are close together (not highly differentiated). Moreover, the content of the parts may vary considerably, suggesting that one can be enmeshed or embedded in many *different* ways. It is this overall level of embeddedness, rather than specific elements of embeddedness, that is our central focus.

The critical aspects of job embeddedness are (1) the extent to which people have links to other people or activities, (2) the extent to which their jobs and communities are similar to or fit with the other aspects in their life spaces, and (3) the ease with which links can be broken—what they would give up if they left, especially if they had to physically move to other cities or homes. We labeled these three dimensions "links," "fit," and "sacrifice," and they are important both on and off the job. This three-by-two matrix suggests six dimensions: links, fit, and sacrifice associated with an individual's organization and with his or her community.

In short, job embeddedness is the extent of an employee's "stuckness," or enmeshing, within a larger social system, and it results from numerous external (or contextual) forces—which are labeled links, fit, and sacrifice—in the organization and community that operate on a focal employee.

## WHAT IS THE EMPIRICAL STRUCTURE OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS?

At the beginning of their conversations, Mitchell and colleagues judged that the prevailing turnover models offered a good understanding of the roles of affect and that such affect was reasonably well measured by standard scales of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and to a lesser extent, job involvement. Thus, they opted to focus on external or contextual influences on turnover. (For their current ideas on how to extract far more explained variance from the effect of job satisfaction on employee turnover, see Liu et al. 2012. For their current theorizing on employee turnover, see Hom et al. 2012.)

In the above description, job embeddedness is theorized to be the result of many possible field, environmental, or (otherwise called) contextual forces. Having good research and teaching colleagues in one's business school is, for example, far more likely to cause embeddedness than embeddedness is to cause the good colleagues. Over time, the theory holds that having children attend the local high school is far more likely to cause embeddedness in the community than embeddedness is to cause kids to attend the local high school. Certainly, situations exist in which the opposite of the theorized causal directions may hold, but they are far less likely.

Based on the original theory, job embeddedness is indeed widely recognized as a causal indicator construct. (Based on the advice of Bollen & Bauldry 2011, we opt for the term "causal indicator model" over the perhaps more common label "formative model" because the former is a more precise definition.) Correspondingly, Mitchell et al. (2001) created and applied a measure of job embeddedness that captures the ideas of a causal indicator construct. In more traditional psychometric language, causal indicators cause the construct as opposed to what happens under the more traditional reflective models in which the underlying constructs determine scale-item values. Moreover, a given indicator (or scale item) need not correlate with any other indicator (or

scale item) in a causal indicator model. Thus, a major limitation of a causal indicator (over a reflective) construct is the inability to apply traditional psychometric tools and standards. For instance, measures of internal consistency (e.g., coefficient alpha) and confirmatory (and perhaps exploratory) factor analysis should not be applied to causal indicator models. (For excellent and general discussions on causal indicator models, see Bagozzi 2007, Bollen 2007, and Howell et al. 2007.)

Recognizing the psychometric limitations of causal indicator models, Crossley et al. (2007) proposed an alternative measure to that of Mitchell et al. (2001). Specifically, Crossley and colleagues developed and tested a seven-item reflective scale for a global measure of job embeddedness (i.e., perceptions of overall job embeddedness). A major attribute of this alternative and reflective measure is that it allows application of traditional psychometric tools (e.g., coefficient alpha; exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis). With a sample of 308 employees from an assisted living facility, Crossley and colleagues found solid evidence for the internal consistency and construct validity of their measure. Further, they embedded (pun intended) both their perceptual measure and Mitchell et al.'s (2001) original scale into a structural model that includes many variables from Mobley's (1977) classic model of turnover (e.g., job satisfaction, job alternatives). Overall, the perceptual measure was a bit more predictive of the Mobley variables than the original causal indicator scale was. Certainly, the evidence merits efforts to replicate Crossley et al. (2007) and further test their perceptual approach.

In our judgment, perceptual measurement of job embeddedness raises three key points. First, the process of measuring job embeddedness is an ongoing issue. Indeed, Mitchell and colleagues did not intend for their provisional measure to be a "well established, standard scale." Instead, they explicitly described their measure as "preliminary and evolving" (Holtom et al. 2013; Lee et al. 2004, p. 720). Thus, comparative research between a reflective and a causal indicator model is interesting but perhaps premature. Certainly, perceptually based measurement of job embeddedness may indeed be an important research direction, but it may also be a fundamentally different construct from that in the original theory and research.

Second, the field or contextual forces that operate and embed employees may not be sufficiently understood. Simply put, we do not yet know what the key forces are in a given setting, organization, industry, or profession. For example, different profiles of causal indicators may hold across private and public organizations' employees (Jiang et al. 2012) versus radiologists and surgeons (Pratt et al. 2006) versus humanities and life science professors. Further, these forces may not operate in a simple linear fashion. For instance, Felps et al. (2009) found that the job embeddedness levels of a work group related to levels of coworkers' job search behaviors, which then increased the likelihood of subsequent voluntary turnover by a focal employee independent of his or her individual level of job embeddedness. In other words, job embeddedness influenced mediating job search behaviors and individual turnover across levels.

Third, the overall perceptual model by Crossley et al. (2007) does not lend itself to studying the dimensions of organizational and community embeddedness or the subdimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice across organizational and community embeddedness. By contrast, the Mitchell et al. (2001) scale does. In our judgment, comparisons between perceptions of job embeddedness and the original causal indicator model of job embeddedness are premature until there is a fuller understanding of how the original construct operates on voluntary employee turnover.

## IS JOB EMBEDDEDNESS PREDICTIVELY VALID?

A key characteristic of causal indicator models is that the primary indicator of goodness is predictive validity. Because the original theory focused on voluntary employee turnover (Mitchell &

Lee 2001), the most immediate test of job embeddedness is the actual prediction of that subsequent outcome. Mitchell et al. (2001) reported the first empirical test of embeddedness. With samples of 177 grocery store and 208 hospital employees, the authors reported bivariate predictive validities of .24 and .25 ($p < .01$ for both), respectively, with voluntary employee turnover. With gender, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job alternatives, and job search (collectively, the standard turnover variables) held constant, embeddedness explained incremental variance in turnover in both samples (logistic $b = .28$, pseudo $r = −.08$ and logistic $b = .19$, pseudo $r = −.14$, respectively; $p < .05$ for both).

Although much of the earlier research uses overall job embeddedness (e.g., Holtom & O'Neill 2004), much of the subsequent research separates it into two major dimensions, namely, organizational (i.e., on-the-job) and community (i.e., off-the-job) embeddedness (e.g., Kraimer et al. 2012). Organizational embeddedness focuses on aspects of the organizational environment that embed the individual (e.g., pension, promotional opportunities), whereas community embeddedness focuses on aspects of the community that embed the individual (e.g., family-oriented environment, quality of available leisure activities) (Lee et al. 2004). In an effort to empirically distinguish between these two dimensions of embeddedness, Jiang et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis involving 65 independent samples ($n = 42,907$). Of note, they found that the corrected weighted average correlation of turnover with organizational embeddedness was −.19 (with a 95% confidence interval of −.27 to −.11) and that with community embeddedness was −.12 (with a 95% confidence interval of −.18 to −.06). Based on a meta-analytic regression, Jiang et al. (2012, table 3) reported that organizational and community embeddedness, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and job alternatives all added uniquely to the prediction of employee turnover. Thus, the evidence clearly shows that all of these variables, including both organizational and community embeddedness, hold a meaningful role in understanding voluntary employee turnover. In other words, job embeddedness is a predictively valid construct.

## PROMISING EXPANSIONS TO THE EFFECT OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS ON VOLUNTARY EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

One sign that job embeddedness resonates with colleagues in organizational psychology and organizational behavior is its theoretical and empirical expansion. Among the most intriguing studies that push the theoretical boundaries for the effect of job embeddedness on turnover are the following.

### Expanding Job Embeddedness to Include National, Cultural, and Family Influences

Ramesh & Gelfand (2010) investigated whether the predictive validity of job embeddedness might generalize from an individualistic to a collectivist culture, namely, from the United States to India, and whether the subdimensions of embeddedness might be differentially predictive across cultures. Equally interesting, they introduced the construct of family embeddedness. Drawing from three call centers in the United States ($n = 323$) and three call centers in India ($n = 474$) and using numerous controls (i.e., organizational commitment, job satisfaction, job search, job alternatives, external prestige, country, years in area, gender, and age), Ramesh and Gelfand reported the predictive validity of job embeddedness in both the Indian and US contexts. Further, they found that the fit dimension of job embeddedness was a better predictor in the United States than in India, whereas the links dimension was a better predictor in India than in the United States. Finally, they showed that family embeddedness predicted turnover in both cultures over and above job embeddedness and controls.

Using data from the European Community Household Panel survey, Tanova & Holtom (2008) studied the effect of job embeddedness on voluntary employee turnover in Denmark, Finland, Italy, and Spain, controlling for gender, age, income, higher education, job satisfaction, job search, and absenteeism. Across the entire sample ($n = 8,952$), both organizational and community embeddedness validly predicted subsequent voluntary turnover. In Denmark ($n = 1,571$) and in Italy ($n = 2,667$), only organizational embeddedness predicted turnover, whereas in Finland ($n = 1,797$) and in Spain ($n = 2,849$), both organizational and community embeddedness predicted turnover.

When taken together, Ramesh & Gelfand (2010) and Tanova & Holtom (2008) expand our confidence in the predictive validity of job embeddedness across nations and cultures. Further and perhaps more important, they begin to explore potential roles of culture, national origin, and family in the effect of embeddedness on turnover.

## Expanding Job Embeddedness to Include Expatriation and Repatriation

Applying a comprehensive structural model, Tharenou & Caulfield (2010) investigated how and why professionals who self-initiate expatriation opt to repatriate. With a sample of 546 Australian expatriates, they studied the effects of host-country embeddedness (the pull to remain due to career and community embeddedness), home-country repatriation (the pull to repatriate), and repatriation shocks on host-country dissatisfaction, intention to repatriate, job search, and actual repatriation. Significant direct effects were found from both career and community embeddedness on host-country dissatisfaction and intention to repatriate. Equally interesting is the finding that shocks had significant direct effects on host-country dissatisfaction, intention to repatriate, job search, and actual repatriation. From a theoretical perspective, these findings are particularly important because they corroborate and extend the original proposal by Mitchell and colleagues that embeddedness is indeed a staying, or stuckness, idea.

Providing another example of the influence of embeddedness on repatriation, Kraimer et al. (2012) applied strain theory to understand the turnover of repatriates. With a sample of 112 repatriates from a range of nations (e.g., Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom), expatriate community embeddedness was positively associated with one's international employee identity, but expatriate organizational embeddedness was not (with time since repatriation, recruiting strategy, cultural distance between home and host country, number of international assignments, and length of last assignment controlled for). When controlling for the prior listed variables and repatriate and expatriate embeddedness, the interaction of employee identity and job deprivation was associated with identity strain. When many of the above variables were controlled for, identity strain predicted subsequent voluntary turnover.

In a very innovative approach to the theory and research on expatriation and repatriation, Ren et al. (2013) switched the focus from the prevailing view of reactive efforts to proactive efforts in dealing with international assignments. Akin to for job embeddedness, the authors induced hypotheses from job demands and resources theory. Specifically, Ren et al. asked why expatriates stay as opposed to why they leave their assignments or organizations. In study 1 ($n = 175$ teachers), antecedent variables (i.e., cross-cultural demands, adjustment, proactive tactics, embeddedness, and retention cognitions) were collected at time 1, and actual retention was assessed at time 2. Adjustment did not relate to retention cognitions or actual retention, but the effects of embeddedness on actual retention were fully mediated by retention cognitions. In study 2 ($n = 109$ teachers), cross-cultural demands and proactive tactics were collected at time 1, adjustment and embeddedness were collected at time 2, retention cognitions were collected at time 3, and retention was assessed at time 4. Although adjustment predicted subsequent

cognitions and retention, only the effect of embeddedness on retention was fully mediated through cognitions.

When considered together, Tharenou & Caulfield (2010), Kraimer et al. (2012), and Ren et al. (2013) offer theoretically rich evidence that job embeddedness is a distal predictor of turnover. In addition, these studies identify theoretically meaningful and perhaps managerially useful variables that allow better understanding and perhaps serve as levers to manipulate the contextual effects of turnover. Most important, job embeddedness becomes enmeshed within a theoretically based, nomological network of variables. As such, our understanding expands beyond simple retention to other constructs and behaviors. These authors' thinking moves our understanding of job embeddedness and turnover far beyond what Mitchell and Lee originally envisioned!

## Expanding Job Embeddedness via Moderators in the Prediction of Turnover

Swider et al. (2011) sought to better understand the effects of job search on subsequent turnover. With a sample of 895 university staff employees, they found strong moderating roles for job satisfaction and available alternatives, with a weaker moderating role emerging for job embeddedness. Specifically, the effect of search on turnover was stronger for those employees with more alternatives, lower satisfaction, and lower embeddedness. Because the independent variables and moderators were collected at the same time, it is plausible that job embeddedness buffers the effect of search on turnover. It may be, for instance, that those with higher job embeddedness require finding a far better job opportunity in order to leave than those with lower embeddedness do. Not only might higher embeddedness generally bind an employee a bit more (e.g., a direct effect), but it may also deflect the desirability of found alternatives (e.g., the interactive effect).

Holtom & Inderrieden (2006) sought to integrate the concept of shocks—jarring events that prompt thoughts of leaving (see the unfolding model of voluntary turnover; Lee & Mitchell 1994)—into prediction of turnover based on job embeddedness. With a sample of 1,898 GMAT test takers, the authors reported that job embeddedness predicted incremental variance in subsequent turnover over and beyond gender and job satisfaction (logistic $b = .42; p < .01$). Further, information on shocks was collected at the same time as the turnover data. Four hundred seventy-five (out of 819) leavers reported shock-induced leaving, whereas 344 leavers did not report any shocks. The shock-induced leavers had a significantly higher level of job embeddedness than nonshock leavers did ($p < .001$). Although the shock data were collected retrospectively, it can be speculated that embeddedness buffers the effect of shocks on turnover.

Lee et al. (2004) reported the first test of the major dimensions of embeddedness, namely, on- and off-the-job embeddedness. Of relevance to this section of the article, these authors theorized and tested the moderation of on- and off-the-job embeddedness on the effects of absences, job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors on employee turnover. With a sample of employees from a financial center ($n$ varied from 621 to 740), they reported that higher on-the-job embeddedness strengthened the positive effect of absences on turnover and strengthened the negative effect of job performance on turnover as well. Moreover, both on- and off-the job embeddedness increased the negative effects of citizenship behaviors on turnover. (We comment further on the direct effects of embeddedness on performance and citizenship below.)

## Expanding Job Embeddedness to Include Turnover Contagion

Felps et al. (2009) theorized that coworkers' job embeddedness has a contagion effect on the voluntary turnover of a focal employee. In study 1, $n = 8,663$ employees were organized into $k = 1,037$ departments at a golf and fine dining organization. The authors hypothesized and found

significant effects of coworkers' job embeddedness on individual employee turnover (HGLM logistic coefficient $= -.16$; $p < .001$), even when controlling for coworkers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment, group size, and local unemployment rate, as well as for individuals' age, tenure, gender, race, work status, job embeddedness, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Further, Felps et al. theorized that this effect is mediated via coworkers' job search, hence, the notion of contagion. In study 2, $n = 234$ bank employees were organized into $k = 45$ bank branches. The empirical finding from study 1 was replicated, and the effect of coworkers' embeddedness on individual employee turnover was fully mediated by coworkers' job search. Perhaps most surprising is that the effect of coworker job embeddedness occurred without the focal employee necessarily being aware of others' embeddedness. We believe that a quite robust process involving job embeddedness on turnover occurs in many organizations.

These studies and their empirical findings suggest a more complicated picture than simple linear effects on turnover across these widely studied work behaviors (e.g., job search, absences, performance, and citizenship) and events (e.g., shocks, contagion). In our view, more comprehensive theory (e.g., Hom et al. 2012) and data collection efforts and analyses (e.g., Liu et al. 2012) are warranted if we are to better understand the role of job embeddedness in the larger nomological network of turnover variables. Be that as it may, we are very pleased that many scholars continue to study and seek to better understand the embeddedness construct.

## THE EFFECT OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS ON JOB PERFORMANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOR

In organizational psychology and organizational behavior, an almost irresistible and perhaps natural direction for research is to study the effects of relatively new constructs on outcomes that are commonly seen as inherently, theoretically, or managerially important. Job embeddedness is no exception. Because the research described below is not based on the original conceptual arguments by Mitchell and colleagues, it might be seen as more exploratory, less theory based, and certainly suggestive of meaningful directions. (At the end of this section and in the Discussion section below, we offer suggestions for future research.)

### Direct Effects and Indirect Effects of Job Embeddedness

In addition to replicating the predictive validity of job embeddedness on turnover (as described above), Lee et al. (2004) offered perhaps the first evidence of the predictive validity of job embeddedness on job performance and organizational citizenship. Specifically, they reasoned that links, fit, and sacrifice have a positive and direct motivational effect on the "decision to perform" (i.e., performance and citizenship; March & Simon 1958). With a sample of employees in a financial institution and controlling for job satisfaction and organizational commitment, Lee et al. found that organizational job embeddedness significantly predicted performance and citizenship, whereas community embeddedness did not. Although the theorized effects of embeddedness on job performance and citizenship behavior on turnover are empirically supported, Mitchell and Lee always judged their theorizing to be somewhat weak. In other words, job embeddedness may well explain why people remain, but it is relatively silent as to the manner(s) in which embedding factors motivate performance. That said, other researchers followed Mitchell and Lee's example in connecting embeddedness and performance, and subsequent studies have provided further empirical evidence of the link between the two concepts, with possibly stronger theoretical explanations than those of Lee and Mitchell.

Using a cross-sectional sample of nurses ($n = 733$) drawn from five hospitals in the Heilongjiang Province in China, Sun et al. (2011) theorized and confirmed the direct effects of job

embeddedness on self-rated performance. The authors also demonstrated the direct effect of psychological capital on self-reported performance and its indirect effect via embeddedness on self-rated performance as well. All effects were statistically significant ($p < .001$). Sun et al. argued that nurses with higher levels of psychological capital are more likely to become embedded in their respective organizations because they enjoy more harmonious relationships with their colleagues, thus enabling deeper links to the organization. Although the authors were largely silent as to the theoretical rationale for why embeddedness would lead to performance, their study provides empirical insight into the relationship between the two, as well as into the antecedents of embeddedness that could impact performance.

Using a sample of US employees from a wide variety of industries ($n = 587$), Halbesleben & Wheeler (2008) sought to establish the unique contributions of job embeddedness and work engagement to the prediction of job performance. When gender, age, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment were controlled for, significant semipartial correlations were found between job embeddedness and performance rating by self and coworkers but not by supervisors. By contrast, work engagement had significant semipartial correlations with performance when rated by self, coworkers, and supervisors. Halbesleben and Wheeler concluded that embeddedness and engagement represent separate constructs and explain unique variance in job performance. In linking embeddedness to performance, the authors argued that job embeddedness promotes performance through the extra resources enjoyed as a result of being embedded in the job (e.g., better access to advice, assistance on the job).

## Moderating Effects of Job Embeddedness

Because embeddedness is primarily a staying construct, Sekiguchi et al. (2008) reasoned (and correctly so in our view) that direct effects between it and performance are not high. Instead, they argued that when leader–member exchange (LMX) is high, organizational fit and links provide employees with more job-related information and supervisory support than when LMX is low. They further hypothesized that low LMX can lead to low embeddedness (i.e., weak feelings of being stuck), a desire to escape from the organization, and lower-quality information and support. In study 1, with $n = 125$ subordinates and $n = 14$ supervisors, Sekiguchi et al. (2008) reported that the slope for LMX on performance was positive but steeper for those with higher job embeddedness than for those with lower levels of embeddedness. In study 2, with $n = 242$ subordinates and $n = 27$ supervisors, Sekiguchi et al. (2008) reported that the slopes for LMX and organizationally based self-esteem on citizenship were also positive but steeper for those with high than for those with lower job embeddedness.

From the domain of hospitality research, Karatepe (2012) studied the moderation of job embeddedness on the effects of coworker and perceived organizational support on turnover intentions and service recovery performance. With a sample of 212 frontline employees at one five-star and three four-star hotels in Cameroon, the study produced empirical findings that support the existence of moderating effects. Thus, in a different nation and setting, further evidence has emerged that theoretically and empirically supports the role of job embeddedness in determining performance.

## Mediating Effects of Job Embeddedness

Grounding their conceptual arguments in the motivational theory of conservation of resources (COR), Wheeler et al. (2012) cogently argued that job embeddedness energizes, directs, and sustains behavior. As such, the process through which embeddedness affects performance is work effort. With a cross-sectional sample of hospital employees ($n = 2,006$) and controlling for age,

gender, education, location, union, commitment, and satisfaction, they reported that work effort fully mediated the effect of organizational embeddedness on self-rated performance, whereas effort did not mediate the effect of community embeddedness on performance. In our view, their conceptual arguments may well be the most compelling case for a linkage between job embeddedness and performance.

In the context of Israeli junior and senior high schools, Lev & Koslowsky (2012) provided reasoning for and an empirical test of the relationships among conscientiousness, organizational embeddedness, and task and contextual performance. With a sample of 115 teachers, the hypothesized main effects between conscientiousness and performance and between organizational embeddedness and performance were supported. Moreover, organizational embeddedness fully mediated the main effects. Thus, the theoretical and empirically meaningful role of embeddedness in predicting performance generalizes again to another nation and setting.

## Mediated-Moderation Effects of Job Embeddedness

Early in the century, Mitchell & Lee (2001) speculated that job embeddedness should lessen or buffer the effects of shocks on employee turnover. Extending that speculation, Burton et al. (2010) theorized that the interpretation of shocks should be affected by the information surrounding it. Specifically, the social context offers cues on what shocks mean (e.g., Should I work harder? Should I work less?). Thus, organizational embeddedness (representing information on links, fit, and sacrifice) buffers the effect of shocks on performance. With a sample of employees from a financial institution ($n = 623$) and controlling for job alternatives and tenure, the authors found that the interactive effect of thoughts of leaving and negative affect had a negative effect on job performance for those with low organizational embeddedness but a positive effect on job performance for those with high job embeddedness. A similar mediated moderation was found for organizational citizenship behavior.

The above-discussed research provides evidence that job embeddedness influences performance and organizational citizenship behavior. Research to date not only has found direct effects of embeddedness on performance and citizenship behaviors but also has begun to identify embeddedness's complex role in mediating and moderating the influence of other predictors of performance.

A common explanation for the empirical effect of job embeddedness on performance is motivationally based. Wheeler et al. (2012), for example, argued that job embeddedness leads to energized, directed, and sustained work effect, which in turn results in greater job performance. Certainly, motivation may well be a good explanation for the effect of embeddedness on performance. However, endogeneity may also be a viable alternative explanation. It is possible that job embeddedness correlates with other—often unmeasured—variables that themselves are correlated with performance. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to resolve these issues, theorists are encouraged to develop cogent and concise conceptual models that explain the linkages among embeddedness, performance, and other variables. For instance, higher job performance may lead to greater rewards and availability of resources, which in turn would create higher job embeddedness. Our point is that our theoretical knowledge appears far behind our empirical knowledge on the association between job embeddedness and performance.

## OTHER INTERESTING EXPANSIONS OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS

### Thomas Ng and Daniel Feldman

In 2007, Thomas Ng and Daniel Feldman began a creative, innovative, and fruitful expansion of job embeddedness. Their theoretical ideas first extended job embeddedness to occupations and

careers (Ng & Feldman 2007) and to careers, mobility, and success (Feldman & Ng 2007). Their subsequent empirical research is equally impressive.

**Innovation and careers.** Expanding their ideas further, Ng & Feldman (2010a) theorized and found evidence of a predictive effect of job embeddedness on innovation-related behaviors ($b = .22$; $p < .05$), while controlling for many demographic and attitudinal variables, on a diverse range of employees ($n = 285$). Further, they reported that job embeddedness had a main effect on spread of innovations ($b = .24$; $p < .05$) and implementation of new ideas ($b = .20$; $p < .05$), and they found that the effect of embeddedness on spread of innovations and implementation of new ideas was moderated by career stage, with those in more advanced career stages more willing to spread innovations and implement new ideas.

**Social and human capital.** Focusing on organizational embeddedness, Ng & Feldman (2010b) argued that increasing organizational embeddedness leads to declines in social and human capital development over time. With a three-wave survey design and a sample of 396 employees across the three administrations, they reported a general finding that highly embedded employees decreased their behaviors aimed at building social capital, which may then have decreased efforts at building their human capital. Most prior research had focused on the positive side of job embeddedness. As noted by the authors, this study may well be the first evidence of a "dark side" of embeddedness. Although others have speculated about such possible negative effects, Ng & Feldman (2010b) demonstrated it. In our view, understanding both the positive and negative sides of embeddedness greatly adds to our body of knowledge and the construct's larger nomological network. The work of Ng and Feldman sets the bar high in this regard.

**Work-to-family and family-to-work conflict.** Focusing on both organizational and community embeddedness, Ng & Feldman (2012) offered competing hypotheses on the changes in both dimensions of embeddedness and changes in work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. In another three-wave survey design, with a sample of 250 US managers and professionals and another 165 Chinese managers and professionals, the authors found positive associations between both dimensions of embeddedness and forms of conflict. Further, the effects were stronger for individuals with individualist values (over collective ones). Like they did in their 2010 study, Ng and Feldman reported suggestive evidence for the dark side of job embeddedness.

The research of Ng and Feldman expands our understanding of job embeddedness in directions never considered by Mitchell or Lee. Most interesting, however, are the empirical results suggesting a dark side of the construct. Job embeddedness has generally been seen as a good thing, but the recent work by Ng and Feldman strongly suggests the need to better understand the potential bad things stemming from job embeddedness.

## Other Interesting Effects

**Negative affectivity and job embeddedness.** Holtom et al. (2012) explored how negative affectivity mediates the effects of shocks on job embeddedness, job search, and counterwork behaviors. With a sample of 279 correctional officers in a two-wave study design, Holtom et al. reported that time-2 job embeddedness mediated the effect of negative shocks on organizational citizenship, job search, and counterwork behaviors. Further, they found that negative affectivity moderated the mediated effects such that higher negative affectivity increased the mediated effects, whereas lower negative affectivity weakened the mediated effects.

**Military reenlistment and retirement.** Because of the unique characteristics of military organizations, Smith et al. (2011) tested for the predictive validity of job satisfaction; perceived job alternatives; affective, continuance, and normative commitment; and organizational and community embeddedness on subsequent separation (i.e., failure to reenlist) and retirement. With a sample of 2,512 enlisted Air Force personnel and controlling for gender, the authors found that the bivariate correlations were largely statistically significant. With logistic regressions, however, continuance commitment and organizational embeddedness negatively predicted turnover, but community embeddedness positively predicted separation. Further, affective commitment, normative commitment, and organizational embeddedness negatively predicted retirement, but community embeddedness positively predicted retirement. Within the Air Force, and perhaps in other military contexts as well, organizational embeddedness appears to decrease the likelihood of leaving or retiring from service, whereas community embeddedness appears to enhance leaving. The authors suggested that these findings are likely due to the unique military context, as remaining in the Air Force often requires moving from community to community every few years.
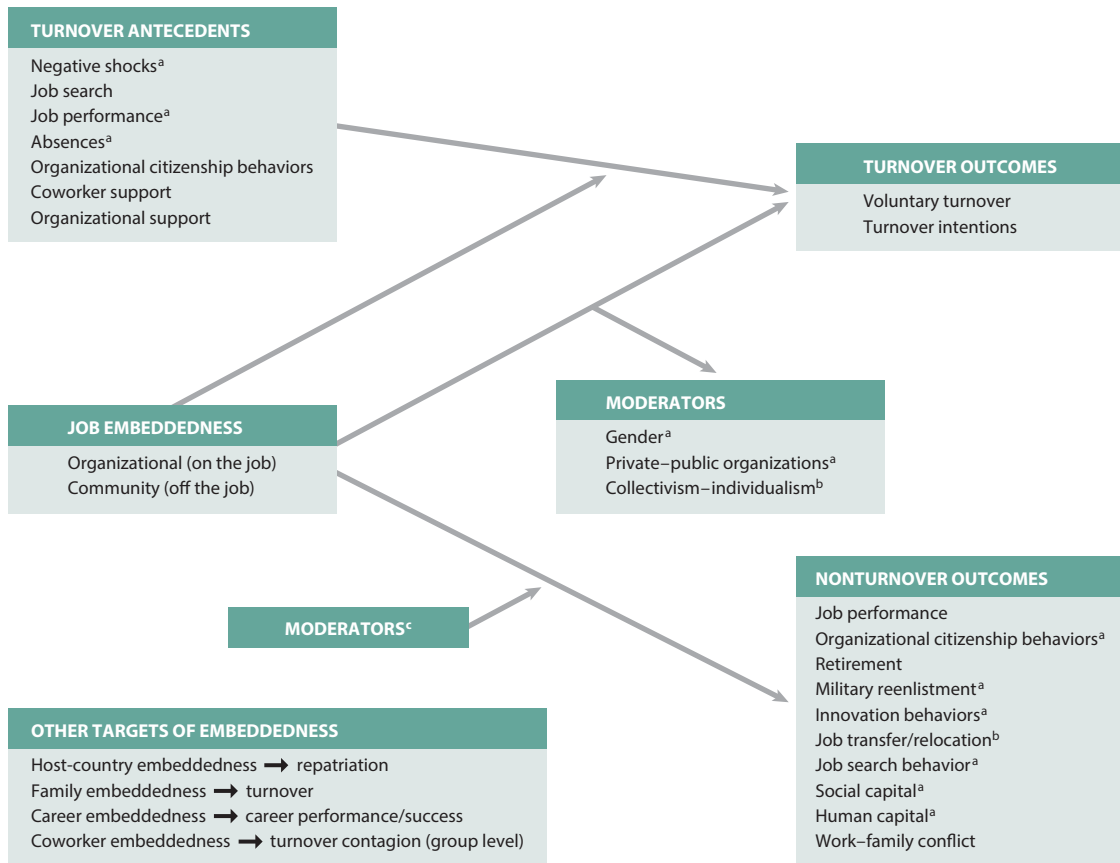
**Willingness to accept a domestic or overseas relocation (transfer).** In a study focusing on late-career French employees (i.e., employees over 50 years old; $n = 584$), Mignonac (2008) sought to understand how "non-work contextual factors" (i.e., community embeddedness, spouses' willingness to move), work attitudes, and individual characteristics predict willingness to accept domestic or overseas relocation. Controlling for age, gender, education, marital status, children, and company tenure, Mignonac found evidence that community embeddedness and spouses' unwillingness to move were deterrents to domestic and overseas relocations, whereas the other predictors were weaker or nonsignificant.

In addition to turnover and performance, job embeddedness influences a broad array of outcomes (e.g., creativity, relocation). As the work of Ng and Feldman points out, not all of these outcomes are strictly positive (e.g., work–family conflict, decreases in social and human capital). These research expansions push the boundaries of how the propensity to stay impacts the cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals. Such expansions are exciting and illustrate clearly the usefulness of embeddedness in explaining human thought and behavior within organizations. The success of these expansions bodes well for the future exploration of the subject.

## DISCUSSION

In many academic endeavors, a vague conversation leads to more specific ideas, which in turn generate new theory and research. Job embeddedness is one of those small conversations among several faculty members and doctoral students that have expanded beyond their original theory and research. In this article, the story of job embeddedness has been reviewed. (Please see **Figure 1** for a depiction of the job embeddedness literature.) First, we explained that the original theoretical focus of job embeddedness was to predict voluntary employee turnover. Further, the original emphasis focused more on contextual factors (e.g., the stuckness in a social network or web) and less on affect (e.g., job satisfaction). Second, we asked the question, what is the empirical structure of job embeddedness? Although remaining committed to the original idea of a causal indicator construct, we recognize that the perceptual approach may well be a viable alternative. Third, we asked, is job embeddedness predictively valid? In a word, the answer is yes.

Fourth, we highlighted some promising, innovative, and impressive new directions for job embeddedness that move well beyond the original conversation (e.g., cultural and family influences, expatriation and repatriation, and potential moderators). Fifth, and adding to the potential managerial usefulness, we reviewed the research predicting job performance and organizational

**TURNOVER ANTECEDENTS**
Negative shocks[a]
Job search
Job performance[a]
Absences[a]
Organizational citizenship behaviors
Coworker support
Organizational support

**TURNOVER OUTCOMES**
Voluntary turnover
Turnover intentions

**JOB EMBEDDEDNESS**
Organizational (on the job)
Community (off the job)

**MODERATORS**
Gender[a]
Private–public organizations[a]
Collectivism–individualism[b]

**MODERATORS[c]**

**NONTURNOVER OUTCOMES**
Job performance
Organizational citizenship behaviors[a]
Retirement
Military reenlistment[a]
Innovation behaviors[a]
Job transfer/relocation[b]
Job search behavior[a]
Social capital[a]
Human capital[a]
Work–family conflict

**OTHER TARGETS OF EMBEDDEDNESS**
Host-country embeddedness ➡ repatriation
Family embeddedness ➡ turnover
Career embeddedness ➡ career performance/success
Coworker embeddedness ➡ turnover contagion (group level)

**Figure 1**

A graphical depiction of the reviewed research on job embeddedness. Superscript a indicates that the relationship applies to organizational embeddedness only; superscript b indicates that the relationship applies to community embeddedness only. Superscript c indicates that because such a large number of moderators have been identified between job embeddedness and specific nonturnover outcomes, we do not list them in the figure.

citizenship. In particular, we applauded the efforts to move beyond simple linear effects to consider moderating, mediating, and mediated-moderation effects as well. Adding a bit more complexity to our thinking should be quite fruitful for future discoveries. Finally, we showed how the theory and research by Ng and Feldman have moved job embeddedness to areas "where no man [or woman] has gone before" (with apologies to all "Trekkies"; e.g., innovations, careers, social and human capital, and work–family conflict).

## Practical Implications

The overarching practical implication of job embeddedness is that contexts exist in which employees are more likely to stay. To the extent that organizations are able to influence those contexts, they will also influence individuals to stay within the organization. To the extent that managers and executives provide resources that embed individuals in the community (e.g., locating in communities with good weather and high quality schools, providing access to community

attractions, encouraging and providing opportunities for employees to become involved in their community) as well as in the organization (e.g., offering attractive benefits packages, linking employees with multiple individuals within the organization, providing strong fit between the employee and the actual job), employees will be more likely to stay. Beyond outlining the impact embeddedness has on staying, our review illustrates that helping employees to become more embedded may impact other key behaviors, such as performance and citizenship behaviors, as well as the accrual of social and human capital.

## Future Directions

Obviously, we are pleased with the attention and progress devoted to the study of job embeddedness. Both empirical and theoretical richness are added to the larger academic conversation about embeddedness. Whereas job embeddedness appears to have increased our understanding of why people stay in or leave their jobs, a number of empirical and theoretical issues restrain our enthusiasm or cause us to reconsider the contributions to date. Of primary concern are the following areas that require more work.

**Empirical issues.** Above, we discuss the topic of causal indicator models for assessing job embeddedness and mention that Crossley et al. (2007) developed a reflector measure of job embeddedness. The validity for causal indicator models becomes increasingly difficult to demonstrate when moderators and mediators occur between the focal construct and the criterion. Because many of the cited studies developed new intervening variables of this type, the reflector strategy may be easier to justify. Nevertheless, the issue is also partly a theoretical one; causal indicator models describe what should be direct causal indicators of the construct (whereas that information is absent for a reflector measure). Future research, perhaps with competitive tests, should sort out this problem.

Almost all the studies on job embeddedness attend to the on-the-job component, whereas only a few investigate the off-the-job component. Only a handful of studies examine the separate dimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice both on and off the job. In our judgment, much can be learned from studying these components, especially given that researchers often find different relationships across these dimensions and across samples. If we use the reflector strategy mentioned above, however, this component information will not be readily available for analyses. Further, the separate composites (i.e., links, fit, and sacrifice) could allow scholars to potentially examine more comprehensive profiles and to apply profile or latent-profile analyses to investigate the patterns of responses and associations across the six dimensions of job embeddedness.

In conducting this review, we learned that scholars now suggest many different types of embeddedness and examine many types of criteria other than turnover. Although we encourage such creative and innovative pursuits, we also hold some reservations. More specifically, many of the new suggestions have been made without serious attempts to integrate the theorized processes that accompany these new ideas. Thus, we strongly encourage more replication and extension of the main ideas already on the table rather than stretching job embeddedness to other venues without substantial efforts to integrate the new research with existing findings and principles.

As noted above, the empirical evidence shows the predictive validity of job embeddedness across many contexts (e.g., cultures, Ramesh & Gelfand 2010; nations, Tanova & Holtom 2008), levels (e.g., Felps et al. 2009), and criteria (e.g., repatriation; Kraimer et al. 2012). Going forward, it may be time to move beyond simple averaging across scores for organizational and community embeddedness and their subdimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice. As touched upon above, researchers might consider differing profiles for job embeddedness across contexts, nations, levels,

or criteria. Specifically, the profiles of these dimensions (i.e., organizational and community embeddedness) and their subdimensions (i.e., links, fit, and sacrifice) should vary. Further, these profiles could be operationalized via latent-profile analysis or simple plots. In this way, the prediction and understanding of the meaningful criteria (e.g., job performance) may be enhanced.

Finally, we recognize that job embeddedness research is very time consuming as well as time stretching. Turnover research most often requires a minimum of two to three years if multiple waves of data are collected. It requires access to large samples (because the base rate for leavers is usually low) and multiple waves of data from actual job holders. Company records are often needed, and postdeparture interviews should be gathered. Getting access to such workers and getting permission to gather multiple assessments are more often than not quite challenging.

**Theoretical issues.** Perhaps the most urgent theoretical issue revolves around whether our causal indicators fully capture the job embeddedness construct space. For example, many scholars and managers suggest that having a leader you like and trust is very embedding. The research on job fit is extensive, but very little research focuses on links or sacrifice. What does a technique such as socialization do? Does psychological capital contribute to embeddedness? What sorts of human resource strategies increase or decrease embeddedness? Of special interest to us is the idea of measuring embeddedness at the organization level. (We once tried to conduct a study on this topic, but it was not completed for a variety of unfortunate reasons.) What sorts of human resource tactics will reduce turnover with organization turnover as the criterion?

In our earlier discussion, we highlighted that we do not feel that the underlying theory for how job embeddedness affects performance is very strong. These mechanisms need to be explained and examined if we are to move forward. Part of the problem is that the idea of being stuck does not really conjure images of "busy beaver" activity. Also of special interest to us is the group of people we call reluctant stayers (Hom et al. 2012). These people want to leave but cannot. They may be very embedded but may not be satisfied with their job or committed to their organization. What is their motivation? Hom et al. (2012) suggested that these people are very different from enthusiastic stayers. Both groups could be embedded, but the associated profiles of constructs describing their behavior may be very different.

Another theoretical issue that has plagued us from the start is our definition of links. Basically, we simply count the number of such ties, for both on- and off-the-job embeddedness. Yet, it is clear to us that some links increase or decrease embeddedness more than others. In our view, it matters who the people in the links are. Off-the-job links with your friends, pastor, club affiliations, or local sports teams all matter as well. We can see ways that being embedded by links in your community might decrease your productivity at work. In particular, some people are in links that are placed within larger social networks. Some people are likely strategically placed, whereas others are not. Links vary in importance, frequency of contact, and location in networks. A better understanding of the links component of embeddedness, both on and off the job, will substantially enhance our collective understanding of how it influences staying or leaving.

Finally, in our view, the article by Liu et al. (2012) is significant in that it identifies some theoretical advances left to be analyzed. For example, the idea of trajectories for job embeddedness has not yet been examined (Liu et al. looked at job satisfaction trajectories). Whether you see yourself as increasing or decreasing in embeddedness likely influences your decision to stay or leave. Adding to this idea (but not examined by Liu et al. 2012) are future estimates of embeddedness. In other words, not only past assessments of embeddedness but also anticipations of future levels of embeddedness matter. Specifically, do people project themselves as being more or less embedded in the future? How do these projections impact current turnover behavior? Liu et al. (2012) also examined the effects of trajectories at different levels—that is, does the job

satisfaction trajectory of your team influence your decisions? It would be interesting to see if the trajectories of embeddedness of one's teammates and the dispersion in those judgments affect turnover.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back, Terry, Tom, and Tyler are satisfied with where scholars in organizational psychology and organizational behavior have been and where we all appear to be going with respect to job embeddedness. Although quite pleased with what scholars know about embeddedness and turnover, "T-cubed" are somewhat less sanguine about research relating to the nonturnover criteria for job embeddedness. More specifically, the theory and research on job embeddedness and turnover appear to be relatively well balanced. By contrast, empirical knowledge on job embeddedness and the other nonturnover outcomes appears more advanced than current theoretical explanations. Thus, we advocate for more theoretical work on these nonturnover outcomes, along with more theoretical work on the nature and structure of job embeddedness itself. Be that as it may, Terry and Tom do feel some sense of pride in what their small band of colleagues began.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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