

Predicting Turnover Based on Relationship Diagnosis – Lessons from Marital Research

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Abstract

Decades of turnover research have identified sets of factors that lead to voluntary employee turnover. However, existing models predict employee separation from organisations with an extremely limited predictive power, which rarely goes far beyond 30%. In contrast, marital research has identified a method for predicting separations which has an accuracy of over 90%, based on a couples' reflections on their past. This paper presents preliminary findings from a pilot study, which applied this method to predicting employee turnover. The study identifies some indicators of distressed and non-distressed marriage that are transferrable to employment context, and indicators that were only identified in organisational context. The paper concludes with an expectation that this method can extend methods of enquiry used in turnover research.

Keywords: employee turnover, methodology, qualitative analysis, employment relationship, oral history interview

Introduction

Despite the recent economic downturn, the problem of employee turnover remains of great concern to organisations (Robert Half International Inc., 2007). Recent surveys show that although reports of downsizing make it into news headlines, turnover is mostly voluntary (Watson Wyatt Data Services 2006). This problem is associated with great costs and disruptions to organisations and has been estimated to range from US\$10,000 (for about half the jobs in the US) to over US\$100,000 (for middle managers) (Vaiman, 2008). In addition, intangible costs, which include potential loss of valuable knowledge, skills, and organisational memory, remain a critical issue for contemporary organisations (Griffeth & Hom, 2001). Predicting employee turnover is one of the main strategies recommended for pre-empting its costs and disruptions and thus is of great value to organisations. Predicting turnover can enable organisations to better prepare for it, by hiring excess employees, cross-training, establishment of knowledge sharing processes, and adapting incentive systems to regulate turnover rates (Mowday, 1984).

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This paper explores a relational approach to the prediction of staff turnover and provides an example of the use of this approach in practice. The paper is organised as follows: first, turnover literature is reviewed to identify turnover prediction weaknesses and recent directions. Then, a brief review of marital prediction methods is introduced, and the Oral History Interview method is presented. Propositions on how to trans-

fer this method to organisational context are made next, following by presenting this paper's research questions. The methodology used to address these research questions and the data collection methods are then presented. The results from this research are presented next, along with a comparison with results from marital research. These results are then discussed, followed by a conclusion of the paper.

Turnover Literature

Although scholars generally agree on the various factors that lead to voluntary turnover (D. G. Allen, Renn, Moffitt, & Vardaman, 2007; Maertz 2004), their current ability to predict such turnover is far from impressive. Considerable research describes the factors that push employees to voluntarily leave organizations (e.g., job dissatisfaction), factors that pull employees away from organisations (e.g., alternative job opportunities), and the processes by which individuals make turnover decisions (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). However, the ability to explain and predict individual voluntary turnover decisions remains limited. Most prediction methods rely on self-reported answers and offer modest accuracy. For example, attitudes typically explain only around 5% of turnover variance (D. G. Allen et al., 2007; Griffeth et al. 2000; Hom & Griffeth 1995). This means that some employees who are satisfied with their jobs separate from their employing organisations, while many who are dissatisfied stay. Similarly, intentions to quit rarely explain more than 15%, which means that even the majority of employees who report intending to quit their jobs do not actually do so (D. G. Allen et al., 2007; Griffeth et al. 2000; Hom & Griffeth 1995). These limitations of existing prediction models indicate that no overarching theory offers a satisfactory explanation and description of organisational turnover. This body of knowledge thus offers modest benefits, if any, to organisations.

This conjunction of limited success in predictions, alongside vast and extensive research, suggests that perhaps this problem can be examined from a fundamentally different perspective. So far, turnover has been studied as if it was a decision which can be predicted mainly based on individual-centric and self-reported constructs (e.g., job satisfaction, organisational commitment, intentions to quit or stay, etc.) (Steel & Lounsbury, 2009). However, the poor prediction accuracy of these methods indicates that this view of voluntary turnover is problematic and may suffer from various problems associated with self-reporting methods: common method variance (Doty & Glick 1998; Griffeth et al., 2000; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Steel & Lounsbury 2009; Winterton 2004), temporal restrictiveness (Sonnentag, 2003), and self-presentation bias (Arnold, Feldman & Purbhoo 1985; Carrère, Ruckstuhl, Buehlman, Gottman, & Coan, 2000). These limitations of self-reporting methods prevent the attainment of a comprehensive understanding of the issue, as indicated from the lack of a comprehensive theory which successfully explains and predicts the process.

Recently, turnover studies have begun to explicitly emphasise the effects of relational variables on turnover (e.g., Mossholder, Settoon & Henagan, 2005), and to examine turnover as a process of voluntary separation from organisations (Winterton, 2004). The study reported here seeks to further enhance the understanding of separation processes, by drawing on existing knowledge of other separation processes.

A different type of voluntary separation that has been extensively studied is voluntary marital separation. Over the past few decades, a substantial understanding of the marital separation process has been gained (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). While a thorough understanding of this related literature is beyond the scope of this work, a meaningful appraisal of the accumulated knowledge in this field, as it relates to organisational turnover, is required. This research will identify the main lessons and developments achieved in this field that are relevant to organisational turnover, in order to develop a model for predicting turnover that is more accurate than cur-

rent models. The next section briefly explains the strong correlations between these two areas of research: marital separation research and organisational turnover.

Successfully Predicting Separations: Methods from Marital Research

Much like voluntary turnover, marital voluntary separation was initially studied using self-reported surveys. However, it was not until this research employed an *interactional* perspective that it began to see predictive empirical results. Marital research has moved from a self-reported and personality-based approach to the study of interaction in the 1950s (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Following this shift, marital research using a multi-method approach rapidly developed from the 1970s, as the interactional perspective required observational methods, rather than self-reported surveys. These methods integrated multi-faceted data, including interactional processes (e.g., conversation, criticism, and withdrawal), physiological indicators (e.g., heart-rate, perspiration, and body temperature), displays of affect, and self-report perceptual data, leading to a greater understanding of marriage processes (Hicks, McWey, Benson, & West, 2004).

One of these observational methods is particularly amenable to use in organisational context. This method has demonstrated a remarkable success at predicting divorce; with an astounding accuracy of over 90%, this widely-cited method has been reported to predict not only *if* a married couple will separate and divorce, but also *when* this separation will take place (i.e., within 7 or 14 years) (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). When considering the modest success turnover prediction models have had, such impressive prediction accuracy is, at the very least, intriguing.

The method relies on the Oral History Interview for data collection. In this joint interview, the spouses are asked to describe significant events in the history of their marriage (i.e., the first date, the wedding planning, etc.). Researchers found that stories that emphasised negative aspects predicted divorce with over 90% accuracy after a three year follow-up (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). The analysis therefore focuses on identifying the ratio between positive and negative displays of affect between the spouses, during this joint interview.

This method for predicting marital separation is based on the fundamental assumption that a successful marriage is sustained by a balance between positive and negative interactions, in three different, but inter-related, domains: perceptual, behavioural, and physiological. An imbalance between positive and negative interactions between partners leads to marital distress and eventually, to separation and divorce (Gottman, 1993, 1999). Predicting this trajectory towards divorce relies on the argument that memories are constructed based on what is cognitively salient (Fincham & Bradbury, 1990), and that they are linked to experienced affect (Bradbury & Fincham, 1987). Distressed couples have been shown to remember and recount mostly negative events, whereas non-distressed couples are more likely to remember positive ones (Buehlman, Carrere, & Siler, 2005). Similarly, it has been suggested that unhappy spouses tend to overlook the positive behaviours of their partners, for the same reason (Weiss, 1980). These notions of selective memory and biased spousal accounts were used to develop the Oral History Interview method, and to successfully predict a couple's trajectory towards divorce (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).

The Oral History Interview method not only identifies a high ratio of negative to positive affective indicators in spouses' descriptions of their marital past. It also identifies several relational indicators in their conversation, which indicate marital distress or lack thereof. Couples' stories of their past are coded for the following dimensions (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000; Gottman et al., 1998):

- (1) Fondness/ Affection towards spouse – this dimension was used to rank the extent to which the couple seemed to be in-love or fond of each other.

- (2) Negativity towards spouse - this dimension was used to assess to what extent the spouse is vague or general about what attracted them to their partner, displays of negative affect towards each other during the interview, and how critical partners are towards each other during the interview.
- (3) We-ness versus Separateness - this dimension was coded according to how much a spouse identifies with being part of a couple, versus emphasising their individuality or independence.
- (4) Expansiveness versus withdrawal – this dimension measures how expressive and expansive a partner is during the interview.
- (5) Dealing with conflict - couples were coded according to how they viewed and dealt with marital conflicts.
 - a. Volatility – couples who oscillate between intense positive and negative emotions
 - b. Chaotic relationships – couples who feel they have low control over the turbulence of their married lives
 - c. Glorifying the struggle – couple who feel like the difficulties in their marriage help them grow closer together.
- (6) Marital disappointment and disillusionment – to what degree the couple feels defeated and depressed about their marriage, and have given up on it.

Couples that scored low on *fondness* (dimension 1), *we-ness* (dimension 3), and *expansiveness* (dimension 4), and high on *negativity* (dimension 2), and *disappointment* (dimension 7) were quite accurately predicted (i.e., 94%) to be divorced within a three-year follow-up. Couples who glorified the struggles in their relationship, and demonstrated positive patterns of behaviour (i.e., fondness, we-ness, etc.) were more likely to remain married.

These behaviours may also exist in organisational context. For example, *negativity* has been identified as a problem in modern organisational life: uncivil behaviour and communication have been identified as significant causes of turnover intentions and behaviour (Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001). A recent study defined these communication patterns as demeaning language and voice tone, making implicit threats, ignoring requests from fellow employees, “flaming” network colleagues, or otherwise demonstrating disregard for others. However, the prediction rate of this recent study (i.e., Pearson et al., 2001) has been within the range of other turnover predictors. This is far from the impressive successful rate of over 80% achieved in marital research (Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrère et al., 2000; Gottman et al., 1998). The study therefore indicates that interactions are relevant to voluntary turnover on the one hand, and on the other hand that this relevance may not be sufficiently captured using self-reported survey methods. This conclusion makes Gottman’s separation predictor both relevant to, and innovative in, turnover research.

Transferring Marital Research Methods to Organisational Context

There have been previous attempts to study the impact of interpersonal relationships within an organisation on staff turnover: relationships with colleagues (Golden, 2007; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010), supervisors (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2010; Dupré & Day, 2007), and subordinates (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010) have been found to influence retention, commitment, and performance. However, a relationship with the *organisation* itself has not been studied directly. There are various indicators that such a relationship indeed exists. First, many of the con-

constructs examined in turnover research are of a relational nature: organisational commitment (N. J. Allen & Meyer, 1990), organisational identification (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), person-organisation fit (McCulloch & Turban, 2007), and perceived organisational support (D. G. Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003). These constructs indicate that employees have elements of an interpersonal relationship with the organisation and not only with specific identified members. Second, the definition of a relationship encapsulates the nature of the relations between employees and organisations. The existence of a relationship requires that interdependence between partners must be evident: that is, the partners must collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship (Hinde, 1979). There is no doubt that these processes continually occur in employment context, and much of management research is concerned with *how* these processes occur. Finally, people have been shown to have human relationships with partners that are not necessarily other human beings (see, e.g., Caughey, (1984) on relationships between fans and movie stars; Buber (1946) on relationships with God or mortal status; Fournier (1998) on relationship with consumer brands).

Even when one accepts that an employment relationship can be seen as an interpersonal relationship, adapting Gottman's methods of separation prediction to predict voluntary organisational turnover is not straightforward. The marital separation predictor relies on the analysis of the *interaction* between the partners (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). However, equivalent interactions between an individual and an *organisation* are difficult to define, since no one particular individual represents the organisation. They have an important relationship with their supervisors (Ballinger, Lehman & Schoorman, 2010; Brunetto et al., 2010; Dupré & Day, 2007), with their co-workers (Brummelhuis, Bakker & Euwema 2010; Golden, 2007; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010), with their subordinates (Harris, Kacmar, & Witt, 2005), and with their customers (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). All of these relationships were found to influence their intentions and behaviour of turnover. In addition to these inter-personal relationships with individuals, employees also interact with groups within the organisation, which are perceived holistically, and not as a collection of separate individuals: co-workers (Groysberg & Lee, 2010) and work-group (Whiteoak, 2007), and management (Bélanger, Edwards, & Wright, 2003). In addition, the organisation's interactions with employees through policies and processes were also found to influence turnover intentions and behaviour (T. D. Allen, 2001; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010; Ng & Butts, 2009). These are all various aspects of the employment relationship – the relationship between the employee and the organisation as a whole. To maintain a holistic view of the organisation, as an entity with whom the employee interacts with, direct interaction may not be suitable.

Unlike direct interactions, which may be difficult to apply to an organisational context, storytelling can be used to examine the individual's perspective on the interaction process. Storytelling has already been used as a method for diagnosis and change of organisational issues (Denning, 2004, 2006). By adjusting the Oral History Interview method to an interview of an individual, rather than of a joint interview, the study reported here explored the outcomes of using it in an organisational context.

This study therefore sought to address the following questions:

1. How does the Oral History Interview method for predicting divorce transfer from marital to organisational context?
2. What relational processes that differentiate distressed and non-distressed marriage appear in organisational context?

These questions were addressed next.

Methodology

This research sought to adjust the Oral History Interview method into organisational context and to examine how the results of its application map onto categories identified in marital research. For this purpose, the interview questions used in the Oral History Interview method in marital research (Buehlman et al., 1992) were adjusted to organisational context. The process of recruitment was asked about, instead of early encounters in marital research. Early days in the workplace were queried, instead of early days in the relationship. Similarly to marital research, good and bad times were asked about directly, and so were longitudinal changes during the course of employment, and the differences between “good” and “bad” workplaces.

These interview questions were used to interview seven academic staff members in an academic institution. Since this research draws on the principles of storytelling, participants were instructed to discuss freely topics that they thought were relevant. The interviews were voice recorded and were analysed directly as sound-recordings using NVivo 9. Coding the interviews was done by identifying themes that are consistent with indicators of relationship quality in marital research. In addition, another theme, similar to a marital process which is not included in the Oral History Coding System, titled “delineation and reduction”, emerged from the data.

To complement the qualitative data collected, and to be able to compare them to quantitative methods, a survey measuring various factors that have been previously linked to staff turnover was administered: perceived organisational support (D. G. Allen et al., 2003; Baranik, Roling, & Eby, 2010; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997), organisational commitment (Benson, 2006; Chang, Chi, & Miao, 2007; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), and overall job satisfaction (Avery, McKay, & Wilson, 2007; Eisenberger et al., 1997; Golden, 2007). Due to the small number of participants, no statistical tests of the scores were conducted. Rather, these scores were merely used to complement the researcher’s understanding of the employment relationship situation.

Sample and Data Collection

The participants were selected randomly. Tenure varied from 10 to 30 years. Two participants were male and the rest were female. Interviews were conducted in the participants’ workplace, in private offices or meeting rooms. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, where early interviews were generally longer than the later ones.

Surveys were distributed immediately after the interview, and were collected over the following few weeks. Some participants refused to answer all questions, for an unexplained reason.

Results

This section is organised as follows: first, the two research questions are addressed. The first question is addressed by presenting the lessons learned from using the marital Oral History Interview in organisational context. The second question is then addressed by demonstrating how relational processes that are similar to marital indicators were identified in organisational interviews. Following the addressing of the research questions, the survey data is presented briefly.

First Research Question – Adjusting the Marital Oral History Interview

Addressing the first research question in this study provides an important insight into the data collection instrument. When adjusting the interview questions used for the marital Oral History Interview, several questions were found to invoke far less stories and testimonies than they would have in marital research. For example, questions about the recruitment and the joining process of

employees rarely yielded elaborate and affect-laden stories. More often, it resulted in short, concise, and factual descriptions. Similarly, the question about the early days in the organisation did not consistently result in elaborate and affect-laden stories.

Furthermore, the pilot study revealed the need to add questions to the interview. The analysis requires both positive and negative references to the organisation. However, the remaining questions did not elicit stories with a great number of affect-laden references from participants. Therefore, a direct question asking the participant about the strengths and the weaknesses of their workplace may be useful, as it seeks both positive and negative feedback about the organisation. The answers can be analysed for their degree of expansiveness and for their content. However, to prevent a common method bias that will lead participants to consistency in their answers between this question about strengths and weaknesses, and between the philosophy of a good and bad workplace, the two questions should not be asked consecutively.

Second Research Question – Relational Processes and Indicators

Even without these adjustments of the interview's questions, this research revealed several processes that were identified in marital research as associated with distressed and non-distressed marriages. However, it is important to note that the degrees of affect displayed by participants were far lower than the affect described in marital research.

This study shows that the indicative processes identified in marital Oral History Interviews, differentiating couples that are on a trajectory to divorce from couples who will remain married, can also be identified in employment history interviews. Due to the small sample size and the short follow-up period available, no conclusions regarding the predictive power of these indicators can be drawn. However, the presence of these indicators in employment history interviews suggests that this is a potentially valuable direction to pursue in the study of employment relationships.

The following sections present the relational processes that were identified in employees' reflections on their past experiences during their employment. First, processes that were also identified as significant indicators in marital research are presented. Then, a relational process that has been only identified in employment context, and not in marital context, is presented.

Marital Processes Relevant to Employment Context

Several relational processes were identified in marital research as indicators of distressed and non-distressed marriage. Some of these indicators were identified in organisational context. The indicators *We-ness*, *Dealing with difficulty*, *Fondness*, and *Negativity*, which have been used to diagnose high- and low- quality relationship (Buehlman et al., 2005; Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrière et al., 2000; Gottman et al., 1998), were also identified in organisational context and are described below.

We-ness versus separateness

This dimension was used to rank to what extent the employee sees themselves as part of the organisation, rather than seeing themselves as separate ("we" versus "them"). This is a similar construct to organisational identification (Dutton et al., 1994).

Fondness

This dimension was used to rate to what extent the employee seems fond of, and appreciative of, the organisation. This includes compliments and superlatives, positive affect (e.g., smiles), and expansiveness and animation of organisational strengths.

Dealing with difficulties / conflict

Two main ways in which employees viewed past conflicts and difficulties emerged from the interviews:

- (a) characterising event – employees see the difficult situation as an indicator of overall organisational characteristic.
- (b) glorifying the struggle – employees see the difficulty as an important step that has contributed to their success in the future.

Negativity towards organisation

This dimension was used to assess how animated and expansive the employee is when discussing flaws in the organisation, and how general or vague they are about the strengths of their employing organisation.

Employment Process

Delineation and reduction

This dimension was not identified in marital research. In this research it was used to estimate the extent to which the employee draws on a coping mechanism during a description of difficulties or organisational deficiencies. The coping mechanism includes reducing scope of the degree to which they are affected and focusing on a limited area of their involvement in organisational aspects, such as their core role or their core organisational unit (for example: “I only work in this unit, so how the other units are managed doesn’t really concern me”, or “That change has increased my workload, but I still manage to have uninterrupted weekends with my family”). This appears to be a self-soothing mechanism, used by the employee to reduce the impact of negative affect on their occupational wellbeing. This mechanism is similar to the self-soothing mechanisms described in marital research, used by members of non-distressed couples during conflict.

Categorising Participants

Three participants exhibited we-ness and fondness towards the organisation in greater degrees than other. The same participants were also the only ones who referred to past difficulties by glorifying the struggle.

Two participants demonstrated greater degrees of negativity towards the organisation, along with lower degrees of fondness and we-ness. The remaining two participants demonstrated low degrees of we-ness, negativity, and fondness. These participants were the only ones who used delineation and reduction in their interviews.

Survey Results

Survey results were analysed to identify degrees of overall job satisfaction, perceived organisational support, and organisational commitment, among participants. All participants attested to a high level of job satisfaction, and medium-to high-levels of commitment and perceived organisational support. On face value, these scores did not vary greatly across participants. Due to the small sample size, no further statistical test have been conducted.

Discussion

Three main points arise from the results: (1) the applicability of the marital Oral History Interview to organisational research, (2) the low affectivity displayed by participants, and (3) an indi-

cation of employment relationship being a separate construct to existing constructs in turnover research.

Applicability of Marital Research Method

The findings indicate that the Oral History Interview method can be adjusted to suit the study of employment relationships. After adjustment, the questions lead employees to generate affect-laden stories about their employment history. These stories contain several indicators that have been used in marital research to distinguish between distressed and non-distressed couples. It is too soon to tell if these indicators distinguish between satisfied and non-satisfied employees, however the presence of these indicators suggests an interesting direction for enquiry. A wider sample and a follow-up study will provide further understanding of the applicability of this method to organisational research.

Low Affectivity Display

The organisational participants displayed far less affect than the levels of affect described in marital research. This can be due to the several factors. First, an employment relationship is less affect-laden, as it involves more pragmatic and calculated aspects. Second, the method of data collection (individual interview as opposed to a couples' interview) may be invoking less affective reactions. This lower level of affectivity makes the coding of affective indicators more difficult, and will perhaps prove more sensitive than marital coding systems, when it comes to predicting separation.

The Employment Relationship Construct

Three categories of employees were identified using the Oral History Coding System, whereas no significant differences between participants were identified using the surveys. This result indicates that the employment relationship, as it is diagnosed using the Oral History Coding System, is likely to be a separate construct, which is not captured by existing organisational measures. This is similar to marital research, where the Oral History Coding System captured a relational construct which was separated from other self-reported measures.

Further Research

A similar study, with a larger and more diverse group of participants, along with a follow-up measure of turnover, as well as organisation- and work-related attitudes, will greatly inform the indicative results in this study. Employees from different fields, and with a wider range of tenure, can provide a wider range of perspectives to this research. In addition, a follow-up can provide a valuable longitudinal perspective.

Conclusion

Despite great differences in nature between marital and employment relationships, there is no doubt that the two are of great significance to a person's life. Affective indicators have been found to successfully predict the future of marital relationships. However, no such accurate predictors have been previously identified for employment relationships. This study sets out to seek the effectiveness of affective indicators and relational processes as indicators of the future of employment relationships.

This paper demonstrates that relational constructs that have been found valuable in diagnosing marital relationships are transferrable to organisational research. The findings of this paper indicate that these constructs are independent of self-reported constructs in organisational research, such as overall job satisfaction, perceived organisational support, and organisational commitment.

This opens a wide field of enquiry when examining employment issues, based on wisdom accumulated in the field of interpersonal relationships.

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Biographies



Irit Alony has been an academic teaching and researching in areas of information systems, management, and organisational behavior since 2006. Irit has developed research interests in the following areas: relationships in the workplace, affect and emotions in the workplace, health care human resources, organisational culture, human decision making, and organisational psychology. Irit is also developing research strengths in areas of qualitative methods. Irit is completing her PhD on organisational turnover prediction in the University of Wollongong in Australia.



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