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Is the past prologue for some more than others? The hobo syndrome and job complexity

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the relationship between an individual's history of changing jobs and future turnover (the so-called "hobo syndrome"). Relying on self-consistency theory, it was hypothesized that the relationship between job mobility history and turnover is moderated by job complexity. Using a sample of 393 employees from two healthcare organizations, multiple methods were used to assess the variables of interest. Job mobility history was assessed with a biodata questionnaire collected before employees were hired. Job complexity was measured objectively by a job complexity index calculated from O*NET data. Turnover was assessed with actual turnover data collected over an 18-month post-hire period. Consistent with our hypothesis, results using event history analyses revealed that previous job changes were positively related to turnover likelihood. Additionally, job complexity moderated the relationship between previous job changes and turnover likelihood, such that previous job changes were more positively related to turnover in complex jobs. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

The topic of turnover is nearly as old as industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology itself. Turnover became a prominent topic after World War I (e.g., Mayo, 1923; Scott & Clothier, 1923; Slichter, 1919; Snow, 1923), and has remained a popular area in personnel psychology research and practice. Much has been learned about turnover in the past century—more than 300 articles have been published on turnover in *Personnel Psychology* and *Journal of Applied Psychology* since 1917. Like many areas of psychology, the study of turnover often proceeds from a person (dispositional traits cause employees to quit), situational (employees leave work because of social or environmental factors), or interactional (person × situation) perspective. Ghiselli (1974) provides one of the more prominent and interesting dispositional explanations of turnover. Specifically, Ghiselli hypothesized that the "hobo syndrome," the tendency to migrate from job to job, arose from some inherent dispositional characteristics (e.g., traits, preferences, or instincts) that predisposed individuals to change jobs frequently. Other researchers have made similar suggestions (e.g., Hulin, 1991; Veiga, 1981). However, little empirical research has addressed this relationship specifically. There are two noteworthy exceptions.

Using event history analysis on a national sample of employees over a nine-year period, Judge and Watanabe (1995) found that individuals who left many jobs were strongly predisposed toward future turnover behavior, even when controlling for human capital, job and labor market, and industry characteristics that might have affected past and present behavior. Munasinghe and Sigman (2004) replicated and extended Judge and Watanabe's results. Their replication found that a history of frequent job changes predicts future turnover even after accounting for a host of statistical and substantive explanations, and that the link was stronger for experienced workers. While these studies consider job context variables that might better elucidate the hobo syndrome, the results and conclusions were somewhat contradictory. Indeed, while Munasinghe and Sigman (2004) replicated

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Judge and Watanabe (1995), they disagreed on the interpretation of the effect. According to Judge and Watanabe, the direct effect of job hopping suggests that employees move from position to position as a result of these dispositional characteristics, regardless of other background or job-related factors. Yet, Munasinghe and Sigman note that because past job mobility better predicts future mobility for experienced workers, this result casts some doubt on this interpretation.

The purpose of the present study is to focus on a critical job-context variable—job complexity—that we argue is particularly relevant to the hobo syndrome. Our main thesis is that the characteristics of the employee's position, specifically the level of stimulating and challenging demands associated with a particular job (i.e. job complexity), are likely to have a significant influence on whether they engage in job hopping. In the next section of the paper, we discuss theory and research on job mobility, the hobo syndrome, and then present hypotheses linking the core study variables (past job mobility, job complexity, and turnover). Using the experiential model of job learning and performance, self-consistency theory, and image theory, we attempt to explain the interplay among job mobility, job complexity, and subsequent turnover.

1. Theory and hypotheses

An employee's propensity to job hop (which we label, going forward, as their degree of job mobility) can have a particularly detrimental effect on an organization's success through increased turnover and in some instances a loss of organizational or tacit knowledge. Combined with the degree of job complexity associated with that employee's position, job mobility can exacerbate these effects. Past literature addressing these two components provide some evidence for these conclusions.

1.1. Job mobility

Changing jobs is a normal part of work life, and many terms have been used to describe this process including turnover and job mobility, with many studies using these terms interchangeably (e.g., Van Vianen, Feij, Krausz, & Taris, 2003). However, while the constructs of job mobility and turnover are related, they are distinct in how they are related to employee behavior. Job mobility refers to patterns of intra- and inter-organizational transitions over the history of a person's career (Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999), essentially a reflection of a person's history of changing jobs. Conversely, turnover refers to voluntary or involuntary permanent withdrawal from a single organization (Robbins & Judge, 2009). In other words, while turnover refers to a person leaving a single job or position, job mobility refers to the intra- and inter-organizational transitions over the course of a person's career.

Although turnover has received ample attention by researchers, in comparison, job mobility remains underexplored in management research. While job mobility research has delved into mobility typology (e.g., Doering & Rhodes, 1996; Louis, 1980b; Nicholson & West, 1988), antecedents (e.g., Finney & Kohlhause, 2008; Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Davey, 2002; Van Ham, Mulder, & Hooimeijer, 2001; Wilk & Sackett, 1996), and outcomes (e.g., Barnett & Miner, 1992; Keith & McWilliams, 1997; Liljegren & Ekberg, 2009; Rosenfeld, 1992; Swaen, Kant, van Amelsvoort, & Beurskens, 2002), job mobility has received considerably less attention in the literature when contrasted against the turnover literature. This relative paucity of research on job mobility is interesting because statistics indicate that changing jobs is a very common practice among employees. For example, American workers have an average of 10.5 jobs over their career (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006), and evidence suggests that this practice is increasing in other industrialized countries (Ng et al., 2007). This statistic is intriguing given that research has linked individuals' past job mobility to their likelihood of leaving their existing employment situation. Accordingly, we will next review the literature concerning this relationship.

1.2. Relationship between job mobility and turnover (hobo syndrome)

The idea that a history of job hopping is related to future turnover is not new. This relationship was first suggested in the literature when Ghiselli (1974) defined the hobo syndrome as "the periodic itch to move from a job in one place to some other job in some other place" (p. 81). The hobo syndrome has been theorized to be dispositional in nature and analogous to the raw, innate migratory impulses of birds (Ghiselli, 1974). In essence, some individuals feel the urge to change jobs after a certain amount of time on a job, often without understanding why themselves. While personal characteristics are thought to play a role in the hobo syndrome, it has been suggested that structural factors also may play a significant role in the hobo syndrome (Judge & Watanabe, 1995). Regardless of the hobo syndrome's causes, applicants who frequently change jobs are viewed negatively by organizations, with most organizations preferring to "screen out" applicants who have changed jobs frequently in the past in order to have a stable workforce (Griffeth & Hom, 2001).

Although the hobo syndrome was conceptualized more than 35 years ago, only two studies—the aforementioned Judge and Watanabe (1995) and Munasinghe and Sigman (2004) studies—have directly investigated the issue. Despite their differences, both studies supported a link between past job mobility and turnover. Additionally, Cheramie, Sturman, and Walsh (2007) found that a history of job movements was positively related to job changes in executives. Moreover, other empirical research, though not directly testing Ghiselli's hypothesis, has lent support to the underlying relationship. Several studies have demonstrated the linkage between turnover history and turnover or turnover intentions (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Judge & Locke, 1993; Price & Mueller, 1986). For example, Wernimont and Campbell (1968) proposed an employee selection strategy that emphasized an assessment of previous behavior as similar to the actual criterion as possible. Calling this approach the behavioral consistency model, Wernimont and Campbell (1968) advocated that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Taking a similar approach, the employee selection model proposed by Asher and Sciarrino (1974), which they called the "point-to-point theory,"