BIG FIVE PERSONALITY AND JOB EMBEDDEDNESS:

EXAMINATION OF JOB EMBEDDEDNESS FROM A DISPOSITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between job embeddedness and turnover from a dispositional perspective using a five-factor personality model as the taxonomy. The present study extends the relationship of job embeddedness and turnover through investigating the relation of the “Big Five” personality dimensions (Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience) to the three dimensions of job embeddedness (fit, links, and sacrifice). It is hypothesized that Extraversion and Agreeableness are positively related to fit and links; Conscientiousness is positively related to links and sacrifice, Neuroticism is negatively related to fit and openness to experience negatively related to sacrifice. The findings of the study will have multi-dimensional implications for research and practice in management, especially in the field of personnel selection.

Keywords: big five personality, job embeddedness, turnover, human resource management and development
INTRODUCTION

One of the constant challenges faced by managers is the development and retention of talent (Mitchell, Holtom & Lee, 2001). One academic study reported that the total cost of employee withdrawal from organizations (including turnover, absence, lateness, and withholding of effort, as well as new hire recruiting selecting and training costs) is 17% of pretax annual income (Sagie, Birati, & Tziner, 2002). Given the fact that personal and organizational costs of leaving a job are often very high, organizational turnover has received substantial attention in the literature (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Based on March and Simon’s (1958) turnover model, previous voluntary turnover researchers focused on why people leave, using perceived ease and desirability of leaving one’s job to predict turnover (e.g., Griffeth et al., 2000; Mobley, 1977). However, Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski and Erez (2001) looked into the factors that keep people stay and introduced a new construct entitled “job embeddedness”.

When job embeddedness was developed, it was framed as a situational construct. Studies were conducted to find out the antecedences such as tenure, interaction with coworkers, and financial benefits associated with the current job as predictors of one’s embeddedness to organizations or community (e.g. Abelson, 1987; Maertz, Stevens, Campion, & Fernandez, 1996; Prestholdt, Lane, & Mathews, 1987). Yet many factors that leads to individuals’ job embeddedness, such as tenure and family structure, are beyond the control of organizations, making it obscure for companies to choose from the HR practices to increase employee’s job embeddedness, which greatly limits the practical value of the construct. If job embeddedness can be captured by personnel selection, it would be easier for organizations to utilize the existing research. Although the construct is largely non-affect driven and individual differences are underemphasized in the main stream of study, Mitchell, et al., (2001) admitted that some of the on-the-job factors, such as organizational fit, do reflect some positive affect towards jobs. As personality leads different individuals to experience the same life events in a more positive or negative fashion (Magnus, Diener, Fujita, & Pavot, 1993), certain people might be more inclined to feel attached to an organization or community than others.

Our paper attempts to understand individual differences in the relationship of job embeddedness and
turnover from a dispositional perspective. Despite the presence of dispositional traits, especially the five factor model of personality in most theoretical models of turnover, nearly all of the models that have been empirically tested treat job satisfaction as an exogenous variable and do not include dispositions as antecedents (Judge et al., 2001; Thoresen et al., 2003). As Tupes and Christal (1961) noted long ago, the five-factor model can be profitably used in most applied settings where personality assessment has been employed. Therefore, using big five traits to predict job embeddedness and turnover not only offers a practical way through which the job embeddedness and turnover relationship can be utilized by practitioners through personnel selection, helping organizations to spot employees that are prone to stay, but also proposes a unique model in which disposition and turnover are meaningfully connected.

THEORY AND PROPOSITIONS

Turnover Research

The study of turnover has a rich theoretical history in which multiple models have been advanced to understand its complexity (Griffeth et al., 2000). Most of the turnover research studies have traditionally followed two main paths. First, the study of turnover from the attitudinal perspective focuses mainly on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. These models are based on the premise that if an individual is unhappy with his or her job and able to find another job, she or he is likely to leave the current job (Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004). Thus, the focus of most turnover models is on job attitudes (job satisfaction or job commitment) as the primary drivers of turnover (e.g. March & Simon, 1958). The second stream of research focuses on the influence of the labor market on turnover through the perceived ease of movement and availability of alternative employment. Variables such as the individual’s expectations about the job, ease of movement, expected benefits from leaving, organizational structure, job search, and availability of alternatives, are added in an attempt to explain additional variance (e.g. Griffeth et al., 2000).
While turnover models have increasingly become more complex, the most variance is still explained by some of the originally proposed variables, which are job attitudes (job satisfaction and job commitment), job alternatives, and job search (Griffeth et al., 2000). Over the years, researchers have determined that, given alternatives, people stay if they are satisfied with their job and committed to their organization, whilst leave if they are not. However, a meta-analysis from Griffeth et al. (2000) indicates that organizational and attachment variables have relatively little explanatory power, explaining only four to five percent of the variance in turnover behavior. The consistent but weak links among attitude, perceived alternative, search, and turnover suggest that many other meaningful topics have been neglected (Mitchell et al., 2001).

The original turnover models of Price & Mueller (1981) and Mobley (1982) mention “non-work” influences and they include family attachments or conflicts between work and family roles. Research on spillover models explains how family and work lives are related (Marshall, Chadwick, & Marshall, 1992). Cohen (1995), for example, shows how non-work commitments like family, hobbies and religion can influence job attitudes and attachment. Lee and Maurer (1999) found that having children at home and a spouse were better predictors of leaving a job than organizational commitment. Although those studies incorporate non-work elements such as non-work values and social relations outside of work, those are only a variety of factors that have been empirically associated with retention, but not extensively integrated into the turnover models. Job embeddedness, on the other hand, including both on and off the job factors that influence staying, takes a unique approach to explaining turnover and was proved to explain significant incremental variance over and above job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job alternatives, and job search (e.g., Cunningham, Fink, & Sagas, 2005).

**Job Embeddedness**

Drawing from the perspectives of embedded figures and field theory (Lewin, 1951), Mitchell et al. (2001) develop the concept of job embeddedness, which describes the factors that keep an individual from leaving the organization, in spite of experiencing situations that might lead to thoughts of leaving. The construct is comprised of three elements: (a) links is connections an employee and his or her family have
in a social, psychological, and financial web that includes work and non-work friends, groups, the community, and the physical environment in which he or she lives. The higher the number of links between the person and the organization, the more an employee is bound to the job and the organization both functionally and emotionally (Mitchell et al., 2001). (b) fit is defined as an employee’s perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment. The theory of job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001) suggests that an employee’s personal values, career goals and plans for the future must fit with the larger corporate culture and the demands of his or her immediate job. A person will also consider how well he or she fits the community and surrounding environment; the better the fit, the higher the likelihood that an employee will feel professionally and personally tied to the organization. Studies have shown that person organization fit (e.g. O’Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991), and person-job fit (Chan, 1996) predicted actual turnover. (c) sacrifice captures the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving one’s job (Mitchell et al., 2001). The more an employee will have to give up when leaving, the more difficult it will be to terminate employment with the organization. Studies found that the attractiveness of the pay and benefits packages, as well as job stability and advancement in the organizations, are negatively related to turnover intention (Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta, 1998).

These three elements are important in the organizational and community context. Job embeddedness can be work related, (e.g. positive relationships with supervisor and coworkers, good health benefits etc) or non-work related (e.g. spouse works in the same area, parents live in the same community, etc.). Thus, job embeddedness can be conceived of as a three by two matrix in which links, fit, and sacrifice are associated with the organizations the communities in which the employees live.

**Five-Factor Model of Personality**

Dispositions play an important role in most theoretical models of turnover. In March and Simon’s (1958) model, the researchers hypothesized that individual differences influence the perceived ease of movement to jobs outside the current employer. Over the past 40 years, a number of researchers have investigated the validity of personality measures for personnel purposes (e.g., Ghiselli, 1973; Guion &
Gottier, 1965; Locke & Hulin, 1962; Schmitt, Gooding, Noe, & Kirsch, 1984). However, at the time these studies were conducted, no well-accepted taxonomy existed for classifying personality traits. In the past 10 years, the views of many personality psychologists have converged regarding the structure and concepts of personality. Generally, researchers agree that there are five robust factors of personality which can serve as a meaningful taxonomy for classifying personality attributes (Digman, 1989). McCrae and Costa (1997) suggest that the Big Five’s universality might be attributed to biological bases of traits, representing a purely psychological consequence of the shared human experiences of living in groups, using abstract thought, or being conscious of your own mortality”. Thus, the same universal personality characteristics should be relevant for employees regardless of the individuals’ nationality or country of assignment.

The Big Five traits are broad personality constructs that are manifested in more specific traits. Factor one, Extraversion, represents the tendency to be outgoing, assertive, active, and excitement seeking. Individuals scoring high on Extraversion are strongly predisposed to the experience of positive emotions (Watson & Clark, 1997). Factor two, Agreeableness, consists of tendencies to be kind, gentle, trusting and trustworthy, and warm. Factor three, Conscientiousness, is indicated by two major facets: achievement and dependability. Conscientiousness is the trait from the five-factor model that, according to Barrick & Mount (1991), best correlates with job performance. Factor four, Neuroticism, often labeled by its opposite, emotional stability, is the tendency to be anxious, fearful, depressed, and moody. According to McCrae & Costa (1991), emotional stability is the principal Big Five trait that leads to life satisfaction and freedom from depression and other mental ailments. Finally, Factor five, Openness to Experience represents the tendency to be creative, imaginative, perceptive, and thoughtful.

Five-Factor Model and Job Embeddedness

Because no prior research has linked the Big Five typology to job embeddedness, in relating the traits to job embeddedness, we describe characteristics and empirical associations of the traits that are relevant to job embeddedness. We group our discussion of these associations by each of the Big Five traits. Given the close connections between attitudes towards life and job (Spector, 1997), we combine
organization and community dimensions of job embeddedness in respect of fit, links and sacrifice respectively. Figure 1 shows the summarized hypothesized relationships between the five factor personalities and the three dimensions of job embeddedness.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Neuroticism

Neuroticism, also known inversely as Emotional Stability, refers to the tendency to experience negative affects (Emmons, Diener, & Larsen, 1985). Those who score high on Neuroticism may experience primarily one specific negative feeling such as anxiety, anger, or depression (McCrae & Costa, 1987), which may cause them to be prone to switch jobs because of a poor perceived fit. On one hand, because people high on Neuroticism tend to select themselves into situations that foster negative affect (Emmons et al., 1985), they are more likely to have negative evaluation for the organization and community. Researchers found the negative relationship between Neuroticism and life satisfaction (e.g. Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2000; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Further empirical evidence supports these arguments as high levels of emotionally unstable individuals tend to exhibit negative moods more frequently, and they are more likely to have higher conflict with coworkers (Organ, 1994), thereby increasing their stress levels (Spector & Jex, 1998), and become less effectively socialized into their organizations (Cote, 2005). We suggest that a similar relationship can be inferred in that they tend to be more easily to be unsatisfied with the surrounding environment.

On the other hand, McCrae and Costa (1991) suggested that people high in neuroticism lack self-confidence and self-esteem. They tend to be unsure about their ability to perform the job (Judge & Ilies, 2002). Watson and Clark (1984) determined that minor frustrations will be deemed as hopelessly difficult and ordinary situations will be perceived as threatening. Therefore, they tend to overestimate the difficulties and are inclined to see themselves as incompetent for the assigned tasks. According to Mitchell et al.’s (2001) theory, an employee must fit with the demands, such as job knowledge, skills, and abilities, of his or her immediate job. The better the fit an employee’s perceives with an organization and
with his or her environment, the higher the likelihood that an employee will feel professionally and personally tied to an organization. The tendency of negatively evaluate environment and personal ability makes neurotic employees less likely to perceive themselves as fit to organization and community.

Proposition 1. Neuroticism is negatively related to organization and community fit.

**Extraversion**

Whereas Neuroticism is related to the experience of negative life events, extraverts are predisposed to experience positive emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1992). One would expect that the factors that cause emotionally stable and extraverted individuals to be happy in life would also lead them to be happy in their jobs. Gray (1971, 1981, & 1987) offered a psychobiological explanation for the role of personality on distinct emotional states. Gray proposed that there are two neurologically based motivational systems: the behavioral activation system (BAS) and the behavioral inhibition system (BIS). These systems respectively regulate behavior in the presence of reward or punishment signals. The BAS and BIS have been operationalized in trait-like terms, such as extraversion or positive emotionality being linked to BAS, whereas the BIS has usually been linked to neuroticism or negative emotionality (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Tellegen, 1985). Because extraversion is strongly related to subjective well-being, more positive affect may lead to positive attitude towards organization and community fit.

DeNeve and Cooper (1998) recognized Extraversion as the key aspects of the “happy personality”, and described happy individuals as not only having specific personality traits, but also having strong relationships (Myers & Diener, 1995). Extraverts frequently display a great deal of commitment to social groups and activities (Judge, Martocchio & Thorensen, 1997); they are more talkative, active and assertive than their introverted counterparts. Extraversion is a main source of positive affect, which stems primarily from connections with others in terms of the quantity and quality of the relationships (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). An extravert gains energy by associating with others and loses energy when alone for any period of time (Barrick & Mount, 1991). An introvert is just the opposite, as they gain energy from doing individual activities such as watching movies or reading and lose energy, sometimes to the point of
exhaustion, from social activities. Evidence also indicates that extraverts have more friends and spend more time in social situations than introverts and, because of their social facility, are likely to find interpersonal interactions (such as those that occur at work) more rewarding (Watson & Clark, 1997). We thus hypothesize that extraverts have a higher tendency to be embedded in an organization and community because of extensive network.

Proposition 2a. Extraversion is positively related to organization and community fit.

Proposition 2b. Extraversion is positively related to organization and community link.

Conscientiousness

There are two ways in which Conscientiousness could influence one’s job embeddedness. First, Conscientiousness can be closely related to fit. Conscientiousness is characterized by personal competence, dutifulness, self-discipline, and deliberation. There is evidence that the Conscientiousness construct is closely related to achievement orientation and has been labeled by some researchers, such as Digman and Takemoto-Chock (1981), as the will to achieve. Conscientious people set higher goals for themselves and tend to achieve more in work settings (Barrick & Mount, 1991), providing one with an identity, and a network of supportive relationships (Myers & Diener, 1995), which increases one’s fit in the group. Moreover, Conscientiousness is positively related to job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2002) and life satisfaction (DeNeva & Cooper, 1998), leading to better perceived fit for organization and community. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) reported that optimal experiences, called “flow” experiences, typically take place when a person is highly challenged and yet has the skills to meet the challenge. The “flow” experience has also been tied to reports of happiness. Results suggest that characteristically engaging in tasks and exerting control provides opportunities for flow. As the notion of self-control is regarded as a key component of Conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992b), people scoring high on this dimension adapt better to the working environment, gain greater satisfaction about what they are doing, and feel more comfortable with their organizations. Likewise, engaging in goal-directed activity and exerting
control over oneself and one's environment enhances quality of life; making conscientious people more likely to feel satisfied with their living in the community and less willing to leave.

On the other hand, the achievement and reward conscientious people have acquired increase their sacrifice if leave the current job. Barrick and Mount (1991) found that Conscientiousness taps traits which are important to the accomplishment of work tasks in all jobs. Those individuals who exhibit traits associated with a strong sense of purpose, obligation and persistence generally perform better than those who do not. Organ and Lingl (1995) argued that this general work involvement tendency leads to a greater likelihood of obtaining satisfying work rewards, both formal (e.g., pay, promotions) and informal (e.g., recognition, respect, feelings of personal accomplishment), which enhance quality of life, such as bigger house and respect from community members (Ones & Visvesvaran, 1996b). As suggested by Mitchell et al. (2001), the more benefits a person is going to give up, such as pay, respect, job stability and advancement, the greater sacrifice he or she is going to experience if they leave the current job. Therefore, it can be inferred that individuals score high on Conscientiousness will more likely to have a successful career in the current job and have to give up more benefits when leaving an organization and community thus have greater job embeddedness.

Proposition 3a. Conscientiousness is positively related to organization and community fit.

Proposition 3b. Conscientiousness is positively related to organization and community sacrifice.

Openness to experience

Costa and McCrae (1988) found that open individuals have a strong need for change, making them less willing to stay in the current place. The relationship can be understood from the perspective of job embeddedness. For people score high in openness to experience, the switching costs might not play a prominent role in keeping them in the organization. According to McCrae (1987), openness to experience correlates with creativity and divergent thinking. Barrick and Mount (1991) also found that people high on this dimension are experience seeking. Conversely, people low on openness to experience are conservative and resistant to change, preferring keeping the status quo to exploring new opportunities.
Therefore, for open people, the opportunities that will bring them new experiences tend to outweigh the material and psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving a job. Among the many factors keeping people stay, nonportable benefits, termed as “sacrifice” by Mitchell et al. (2001), play a salient buffering role to turnover. We thus hypothesize that openness to experience is negatively related to the sacrifice dimension.

Further, different from people low on openness to experience who prefer to keep the existing relationship, open people generally have wide range of interests and are open-minded, so that they are willing to establish connections with different type of people and perceive a larger number of alternate employment opportunities (March & Simon, 1958). Costa and McCrae (1988) also found that open individuals are better able to understand and adapt to other’s perspectives. Individuals high on openness to experience, generally regarded as intelligent and insightful, are more likely to possess cognitive complexity and intuitive perceptual accuracy to accurately perceive and interpret the situation and take actions accordingly (McCrea, 1996), making adaptation to the new environment easier for them. Therefore, with confidence and ability to build up comparable networks and achievement in the new job, open people find leaving the current working or living environment less threatening or risky, and they are more willing to explore new opportunities.

Although ample theoretical evidence suggests that open people are more likely to leave their organizations, there is some evidence to suggest the reverse would be true. Barrick and Mount (1991) found that people high on this dimension are more likely to benefit from training programs because their positive attitudes towards learning experiences in general. Because the better the required skills and knowledge employees have developed, the better the fit that they will perceive for their current job. On the other hand, greater openness or intellect is related to employee adjustment. Individuals higher in this personality characteristic will have fewer rigid views of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate (Black, 1990), which reduces the possibility for open people to have perceived conflicts with their organizations. But the majority of the theoretical evidence suggests that open people are more likely to leave, we thus hypothesize a negative relationship between openness to experience to job embeddedness.
Proposition 4. Openness to experience is negatively related to organization and community sacrifice.

Agreeableness

There are two ways through which Agreeableness is related to job embeddedness. First, it is suggested that agreeable individuals have greater motivation to achieve interpersonal intimacy (McCrae & Costa, 1991). According to the evolutionary theory, individuals who are more agreeable have an easier time forming social alliances. Compared with disagreeable people who are less likely to extend themselves for other people because their skepticism about others’ motives causes them to be suspicious, unfriendly, and uncooperative, agreeable people are trusting and will take initiative to get along with others (Organ & Lingl, 1995). Meanwhile, Agreeableness is often associated with traits such as courteous, good-natured, and concerned with other’s interest (Wiggins, 1996), it is understandable that it is easier for agreeable people to be accepted and liked in the surrounding environment, thus bringing them more friends and connections within an organization or community. In their meta-analysis, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) suggested that agreeableness fosters more and better relationships.

In addition, those employees who are able to establish a social network may have a more positive experience in the organization and community. Being agreeable not only wins an employee more friends, kind and likable nature also helps him or her to create a favorable environment in which one can easily fit in because he or she is less likely to have conflict with colleagues and neighbours. Meanwhile, according to job embeddedness theory, an employee’s personal values, career goals must fit with the larger corporate culture. The tendency to be compliant makes agreeable people more likely to follow the organizational rules and regulation, and to adapt to surrounding environment because they are more cooperative and flexible in nature, and tend to deal with conflicts collaboratively. For example, Black (1990) suggests that more agreeable expatriates report greater cross-cultural adjustment. We suggest that the tendency to actively adjust oneself to the environment does not limit to expatriates and that agreeable people are more likely to be in tune with organization’s values and adjusted themselves to the working and living settings.
Proposition 5a. Agreeableness is positively related to organization and community link.

Proposition 5b. Agreeableness is positively related to organization and community fit.

**Job Embeddedness and Turnover**

Reflecting the situation of people's being integrated in a social web, job embeddedness is a retention construct which captures a sizable portion of the decision to leave the organization (Lee et al., 2004). Mitchell et al. (2001) provided initial empirical support for the negative relationship between job embeddedness and turnover. They found that aggregated job embeddedness correlated with intention to leave and predicted subsequent voluntary turnover after the effects of gender, satisfaction, commitment, job search, and perceived alternatives had been controlled. Lee et al. (2004), extending the study by looking into the different impacts of on and off-job embeddedness on withdrawal behaviors, further confirmed job embeddedness’ effects on reducing turnover. In more recent work, Holtom and Indderieden (2006) have integrated the unfolding model of turnover (why people leave) and job embeddedness (why people stay) to obtain a more comprehensive picture of organizational attachment. In a large national study of stayers and leavers across hundreds of employers, they found that stayers were found to have the highest levels of job embeddedness. They also found that job embeddedness tended to buffer an individual from shocks. Given a particular shock (e.g., restructuring), employees who were embedded were less likely to leave than those who were not embedded. As the effects of job embeddedness on turnover have been tested using different samples and settings (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Mallol, Holtom, & Lee, 2007), the factors discussed in the propositions above, all of which lead to individuals’ social integration and attachment in organizations and community, are supposed to contribute to one’s decision of staying in the current job.

**CONCLUSION**

The paper makes unique contribution to the field of turnover study by examination the relationship between job embeddedness and turnover from a dispositional perspective using the five-factor personality model as the taxonomy. The present study offers important implications for both research and practice in
personnel selection. From a practitioner’s standpoint, the links between personality and job embeddedness gives HR specialists stronger confidence in using personality test in personnel selection; not only to select employees who will make profit for their organizations, but who will remain in the organization. For researchers, it offers a new perspective through which job embeddedness can be studied, which sheds lights on employee retention. If the relationship between personality and job embeddedness can be established, it also provides additional justification to consider voluntary turnover from a dispositional perspective. Although various studies concerning dispositional approach to turnover have been conducted (see Zimmerman, 2008), most researches still applied traditional precursor of turnover such as job attitudes and job alternatives to explain the relationship. By looking into the dispositional nature of job embeddedness, we not only open up a perspective from which a new construct can be studied, also add to the understating of disposition and turnover relationship.

Because the current study serves as an initial exploration of the job embeddedness from an aspect that the construct was not intended to address when it was originally developed, no established theories are available to serve as the mechanism through which the hypothesized model can be explained, thus serving as a major concern for the study. However, due to the exploratory nature of the study, this may not be a major problem.

The five-factor model, although powerful in describing personalities, can still be insufficient. Future research on job embeddedness could focus on other dispositional factors, such as risk seeking and locus of control, which might cast additional influence on job embeddedness and turnover. It is also meaningful for researchers to study under what situation, such as different life or career stage, would a person more likely to be embedded.
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Figure 1: Hypothesized Model of Big Five and Job Embeddedness

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