



WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS? IDENTITY AND WELLBEING IN SENSEMAKING ABOUT RETENTION AND TURNOVER

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Working Paper

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**WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS? IDENTITY AND WELLBEING IN
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ABSTRACT

Explanations of turnover from extant management research focus on the what (content) and how (process) of turnover. This study explores the why (meaning) to employees of quitting or staying at an employing organization, in order to add a new layer to our understanding of retention and turnover. Analysis of data from in-depth interviews with leavers and stayers, both *post hoc* and *in situ*, using grounded theory methods, reveals identity and psychological wellbeing assessment sensemaking cycles, which occur periodically or when threat to core elements of identity and wellbeing across life domains is perceived. Core elements of identity and wellbeing include purpose, trajectory, relatedness, expression, acceptance, and differentiation (PTREAD). Perceived threat to PTREAD elements across life domains leads to coping, often with varying levels of psychophysiological strain, and re-assessments, often in repeated cycles. Successful coping and lack of threat to PTREAD elements result in retention. Unsuccessful coping with threat to PTREAD elements results in retention while repeated occur, and in voluntary turnover. Cycles of unsuccessful coping deplete resources over time, escalating strain and contributing to turnover. Overall, these findings suggest that from the perspective of the actors “being retained” or “turning over,” retention and turnover are part of a quest for positive, congruent identity and holistic psychological wellbeing. Implications for research on retention, turnover, identity, wellbeing, and psychophysiology in organizations, as well as practical implications, are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Identity, wellbeing, retention, turnover

He said, "I've had it! To the passenger who called me a mother*****, **** you! I've been in this business for 28 years and that's it. I'm done." (Gardner, 2010).

On Monday, August 9, 2010, Jet Blue flight attendant Steven Slater reacted strongly to a belligerent customer during the deplaning process. This passenger started to retrieve her luggage from an overhead bin before it was safe to do so, and when Mr. Slater asked her to desist, she cursed him. Mr. Slater then “grabbed his bags—and two cans of beer from the galley—and popped the lever for the plane's inflatable emergency chute. He threw the bags on to it before sliding down to the tarmac himself” (Gardner, 2010). Press reports after the incident suggest that Mr. Slater had experienced such incidents before, yet not quit.

“For 20 years, I thought about it,” he said in an interview on Wednesday morning....
“But you never think you’re going to do it.” (Kilgannon & Robbins, 2010).

This widely reported incident of voluntary turnover may not be typical, but it highlights aspects of the phenomena not well explained by extant models. Dominant models in management literatures focus on the what (content) and how (process) of turnover (Maertz & Campion, 2004), are generally sequential and linear (Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005), and focus on job dissatisfaction as the primary cause, with important modifications adding discrete events or “shocks to the system” (Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, & Hill, 1999) and job embeddedness (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004). This does not fully explain Mr. Slater’s exit however, as he had experienced similar content and shocks, in a similar process, and was similarly embedded previously, yet this incident led to him quitting. Why?

Reviews indicate that researchers are not content with the predictive power of current models of turnover (e.g., Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). Its bounds may be due in part to over-reliance on limited types of data and methodologies in turnover research (Russell, 2013). For example, there may be underuse of leavers’ self-reports and post-exit in-depth interviews

(Bergman, Payne, & Boswell, 2012; Maertz, 2012). In this study, we use these types of data to explore “the why” of retention and turnover from the perspectives of the actors involved, using grounded theory. Thus, our study begins to fill a significant methodological gap in turnover research. In addition, we argue that understanding employees’ sensemaking processes about *why* they stay or quit—its meaning to them—is important in itself, and may also point in new directions of content and process.

Our findings suggest that turnover is part of a quest for identity and psychological wellbeing in life. Threats to holistic wellbeing and positive, congruent identity across life domains result in mental and physical strain and coping. Coping occurs in cycles lasting from days to decades during which individuals stay in jobs, and continues across turnover incidents. Some people experience increasing strain with repeated cycles of coping, which may explain why shocks and levels of job dissatisfaction impact different individuals differently, and the same individual differently at different times. Our findings also suggest that jobs allowing for expression of identity across life domains, and that foster holistic psychological wellbeing, contribute to engaged retention above and beyond job satisfaction, and build resilience to shocks.

CONTEMPORARY TURNOVER CONCERNS

Turnover has been a focus of research for a century and continues to be of interest due to its impacts on organizations and workers (Hom et al., 2012). Voluntary turnover is costly to organizations when good performers leave—termed dysfunctional turnover (Hollenbeck & Williams, 1986), and turnover negatively impacts performance for most organizations, especially when quality or customer service are important and when managers and leaders leave (Park & Shaw, 2013). Job and organization change is also significant to workers (Feldman & Ng, 2007).

Recently, researchers have pointed out that we need to learn more about the states leading

up to turnover (e.g., Boswell et al., 2005; Hom et al., 2012). Before exploring additional determinants of turnover however, we believe it is important to deeply understand the perspectives of those “being retained” or “turning over,” and specifically the meaning individuals ascribe to staying or quitting. Although staying or quitting is a *worker* behavior, the assumptions about what causes it, which underlie many extant models, may too often have focused on organizations at the expense of meaning to workers in their lives, as may be true in other management and psychology literatures (Brief & Nord, 1992; Budd, 2011; Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge, 2009; Gephart, 2004; Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013; Weiss & Rupp, 2011).

Focusing on the meaning of retention and turnover to employees is important in itself, and may also help management. Frustrated desire to turnover may have even more deleterious effects on organizations and individuals than does turnover itself, and is increasingly of concern in organizations (e.g., Korkki, 2013; Picoult, 2010). Researchers have suggested that,

...maybe we would be better off predicting turnover intentions rather than turnover behavior. ...[O]rganizations have a better chance of changing behavior if they can intervene before the intentions manifest themselves. And, [turnover intentions have] implications for other workplace behavior. (Bergman et al., 2012: 867).

The widespread response to the memorable exit of Mr. Slater from JetBlue illustrates this potential impact, and is perhaps more alarming than the turnover incident itself, which could be viewed as idiosyncratic. Later in the month he quit,

... Slater [became] an unlikely folk hero in the U.S. ...a string of pages had been set up in tribute to him on the Facebook website, with many social networkers admiring his grand exit. (Carey, 2010).

The glee with which other workers embraced Mr. Slater’s spectacular exit suggests that even short of turnover, there is much to be gained from understanding workers’ sensemaking about why they stay or quit, attitudes toward turnover that exist in them prior to actual turnover, and conversely, what types of sensemaking result in engaged retention.

Most management turnover research is based on March and Simon's (1958) theory positing two primary drivers: the ease and desirability of moving, and perhaps even more on Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino's (1979) operationalization of these elements (Hom et al., 2012; Russell, 2013). In addition to desirability, operationalized as job dissatisfaction, and ease, operationalized as levels of alternatives, researchers have studied kinship ties (e.g., Blegen, Mueller, & Price, 1988), embeddedness in jobs and communities (e.g., Lee et al., 2004), and events on jobs and in lives termed "shocks to the system" (e.g., Lee et al., 1999). Alternatives are measured chiefly by proxies such as economic and labor market conditions, rather than by attributes of the alternatives themselves. Thus, the *content*, or what makes people think about leaving, has most often been operationalized as dissatisfaction with the job, supplemented by proxies for alternatives, and limited other work and non-work considerations. By implication, given alternative jobs, people may leave because they perceive that the potential for satisfaction with new jobs is greater than with current jobs (Lee et al., 1999). Advances built on the Mobley model posit different paths to turnover taken by different types of leavers; Lee et al. (1999) propose five such paths, Maertz and Campion (2004) four, and Lee, Gerhart, Well, and Trevor (2008) four types of leavers. Others have suggested that strong and poor performers also experience turnover differently (Salamin & Hom, 2005; Shaw et al., 2009). These groups and paths are differentiated by what motivates turnover—for example, chronic dissatisfaction, an emotion, or a specific event—but are similar in that all involve a relatively linear *process* with primary causes and stages that end in turnover.

Yet not all who experience dissatisfaction and shocks leave, and to the extent key shocks have been identified—for example Lee et al. (2008) identified unsolicited job offers, promotions, changes in marital status, transfers, firm mergers, and downsizing—not everyone who

experiences them leaves, even in a good labor market for workers. We believe this is due in part to different meanings ascribed to similar content, shocks, and processes by workers. Budd (2011) makes a compelling case that the twentieth-century emphasis on a limited number of conceptualizations of what work means, with emphasis on economic and transactional explanations versus psychological, relational, and social ones, has resulted in unnecessarily partial explanations of work-related phenomena in management and other research literatures. He argues that a more inclusive conceptualization of work, including the meanings of work phenomena to individuals, will result in a more holistic understanding of jobs, work, and related phenomena. We agree, and in this research, we explore this for retention and turnover.

To summarize, calls in the literature to explore beyond dominant models, to explore psychological states more distal to turnover, for qualitative studies, and to explore the meaning of work to workers, and observations that research using extant models explains only 10-25% of voluntary turnover, all suggest need for alternative approaches (Boswell et al., 2005; Brief & Nord, 1992; Budd, 2011; Gephart, 2004; Hom et al., 2012; Maertz, 2012; Markman et al., 2013; Russell, 2013). The potential to more fully understand organizationally relevant but individually based phenomena from the perspectives of the actors, rather than from that of the organization or extant literatures, suggests a direction for this development.

METHOD

We began by seeking to understand how voluntary leavers experienced turnover, and in doing so, found ourselves also exploring sensemaking about retention in current jobs. Given these goals, we used grounded theory methodology and collected data using in-depth interviews and focus groups. Grounded theory allows a comprehensive understanding of complex issues by allowing “people to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have

read in the literature” (Creswell, 2007: 40).

Informants and Data Collection Process

We ultimately obtained data from 59 informants primarily using in-depth interviews (53 informants) supplemented by two focus groups (three people each for six additional informants). We used the *theoretical sampling technique* to select informants. This is a non-random sampling technique wherein researchers select a diverse set of theoretically relevant informants that allow them to dig deeper and gain greater understanding of issues, and to develop or expand theory rather than provide generalizations (Creswell, 2007: 240-241).

Consistent with this technique, we started with diverse informants who had recently left their jobs (leavers). Following recommendations to sample broadly in order to build grounded insights (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we formed this initial informant pool to be diverse with respect to a wide range of technical specialties and organizational levels, as well as sex, age, and family status, because these factors may impact career-related decisions (Feldman & Ng, 2007). Access to records of recent leavers was granted through collaboration with four organizations; 44 informants came from these organizations. As data collection and analysis progressed, as explained further in the following section, we widened our sampling to include 15 additional informants including leavers from small, mid-sized, and non-corporate organizations, and informants who had not left jobs recently (stayers).

Our informants represent many specialties and levels, from executives to equipment operators. Of 46 informants who reported age, they ranged in age from 20 to 58, with an average age of 40; 56% were women; close to a third had no children, a third had two children, and the remaining third had either one or more than two. Of those who had left their jobs, informants had gone to large companies (22%), small-to-mid-sized companies (32%), government (4%),

school (14%), sabbatical/time off and job search (12%), and homemaking (4%), or had started their own businesses (12%). Informants represent a broad range of tenure in organizations, from under one to over 26 years; diversity of educational levels, consisting of people with high school (20%), college (56%), and graduate (24%) degrees; include Asian-American, Native American, and African-American informants although the majority (89%) were white; and include individuals with blue-collar jobs, although the majority (97%) held white- or pink-collar jobs.

In addition to primary interview questions, we collected demographic and work-oriented information on a paper survey, including the question: *How did your direct supervisor rate your most recent performance in your last evaluation in this job?* Forty informants answered, indicating that they had received high (73%), midrange (25%) and low (3%) performance evaluations. In addition, many informants told us of former employers' efforts to retain them and of open offers to return. Together, this evidence suggests that generally our informants were valued, and their turnover was likely dysfunctional for their organizations.

Others have suggested different reasons for leaving resulting in differing paths to turnover, so we went back to our data and coded informants by primary reasons for leaving. Our informant pool included those who had left in part based on an earlier pre-programmed decision (e.g., not getting the second promised promotion), those who were triggered by a specific event into assessing their situations (e.g., a merger), those who had long-term dissatisfaction, and those who were satisfied with their jobs. Thus, the paths and groups of different kinds of leavers identified in the work of Lee, Mitchell, and colleagues (e.g., Lee et al., 1999) and others (Lee et al., 2008; Maertz & Campion, 2004) were represented, and the processes of sensemaking we identified were discernible in all these cases. Similarly, we coded informants for having new

jobs lined up or not, finding that 58% of our informants had new jobs lined up when they quit, 12% immediately started businesses, and 30% did not work for pay immediately after quitting.

After our analysis of initial interviews, we followed an analytical trail (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 146; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008: 257-270) to identify key concepts, which directed us to select additional informants. For example, as early analyses indicated the importance of identity, we wondered if this was due to interviewing primarily professional and technical workers, so we added directors, managers, and blue collar, line-level, and support workers. Our emerging model made us realize that sensemaking processes were similar for both the job left and the one to which leavers had went next. To explore this more broadly, at that point we added informants who had not left jobs (stayers). Thus, our final informant pool included fifty leavers and nine stayers. Interviewing leavers about the jobs they left and their current jobs or situations, and interviewing stayers, allowed us to collect both *post hoc* and *in situ* data (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1364).

In our final interviews, we saw repetition and confirmation of conceptual categories, which indicated that we had reached *theoretical saturation* over multiple dimensions on our theoretically selected pool of informants, as described above. Therefore, we stopped data collection.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, and were conducted at times and places convenient to informants. All were audio-taped, resulting in more than 90 hours of recording, and were typed verbatim by an independent transcriptionist. We also conducted two focus groups of three participants; each lasted over 80 minutes and was also typed verbatim. Focus groups were conducted to assess whether they would reveal new insights that were not captured

through interviews and to continue to expand the diversity of the informant pool.

In setting the tone for interviews and focus groups, we focused on creating a sense of trust and psychological safety in order to encourage an honest and full accounting of each individual's story. We did this in numerous ways. We consciously prepared to be and appear interested in all aspects of informants' stories, maintained silence in order to let informants process and direct the interviews, and be nonjudgmental when listening. In addition, we assured informants of confidentiality and anonymity orally and in writing, and gave specific examples of how their responses would be used. We used warm-up questions to build familiarity before asking primary research questions, which also served other purposes including to confirm the focal job for the interview, the voluntariness of leaving, and primary tasks and other information about the jobs left, new jobs or situations in the case of leavers, and the jobs stayers were in.

We then asked our two primary questions: *Why did you leave (name of former employer)?* and *Why did you go to (new situation)?* The authors conducted all interviews and focus groups, using these primary questions and the probe questions: "Can you give me an example of that?" and "Please tell me more about that." While asking these probe questions, we took care to use questions that were generic to encourage in-depth examples and details. In asking about specific details, probes were customized to what each informant had just said. We reflected back our understanding of what informants told us to assure accuracy and clarity. Overall, this minimized potential interviewer-induced bias and provided informants opportunities to correct anything we had misunderstood. Finally, we modified our primary questions for stayers to: *Do you ever consider leaving your employer? Why or why not?*

For the 44 informants who left four specific organizations, we triangulated data on the voluntariness of leaving, confirming the organization report with the perception of the informant

and our own perception on hearing their stories. This has been identified as an important factor for turnover research because of differing definitions and uses of the term voluntary turnover in different organizations (Bergman et al., 2012; Maertz, 2012).

Data Analysis

All authors independently read all interviews as they were completed and multiple times thereafter. In addition, we used QSR International's NVivo software to manage interview and focus group notes, reviewing existing transcripts to identify emerging themes that guided subsequent data collection by coding our data using open and axial methods recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008), and meeting frequently to discuss emerging themes. In open coding, researchers identify concepts in the data using *in vivo* codes (i.e., concepts represented by actual language used by informants). For example, some informants used phrases indicating that the job was not "who I am," or that they had to be "not me" to do the job. The second step in the analytical process entailed grouping in-vivo codes into higher level concepts called first order categories, based on underlying similarities. In this example, we deduced that our informants felt core selves factored into their sensemaking about staying or quitting.

The third step in the analytical process is axial coding. This step allows researchers to search for relationships between and among first order categories and assemble them into second order themes that allow researchers to identify the broader emergent framework. Especially at this stage of our analysis, but also throughout, we consulted diverse literatures to identify the constructs that were emerging in our data; this is discussed in more detail in the findings section below. Continuing with the example, we identified that the codes and categories mentioned above, combined with others and in consultation with literatures, indicated a sense of threat to elements of identity. In the final step, second order themes are examined for theoretical

similarity. In this case, in combination with another second order category, the analysis led us to conclude that people assessed specific core elements of identity and wellbeing periodically or when threat was perceived, and that this assessment was central to turnover decisions. In Table 1, we show these and additional examples of *in vivo* codes and the resultant first order categories, second order themes, and the theoretical framework that emerged from our data.

 Insert Table 1 about here

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Data reliability and analytical validity are important considerations in any qualitative study. We were mindful of this throughout our data collection and analysis, and took a number of steps to maintain data trustworthiness and ensure analytical rigor. To ensure validity, we followed interrelated procedures recommended for qualitative research by Silverman and Marvasti (2008: 257-270): (a) refutability, (b) constant comparison, (c) comprehensive data treatment, (d) deviant-case analysis, and (e) respondent validation.

Refutability refers to attempts to refute emergent relationships among phenomena. We searched for cases that would be likely to refute our model, as described earlier. Our assessment suggested that our emergent findings were consistent across diverse informants in diverse and theoretical relevant contexts. The second technique, *constant comparison*, involves two elements. Researchers first inspect and compare all data fragments that arise in a single case and second, begin analysis on a small part and expand through all the data. Once a set of categories was generated, we tested the emergent themes by steadily expanding the body of data, as described earlier. One example of a finding refuted by constant comparison was that early analyses indicated that a shift in identity had occurred for informants; however combing through

additional cases indicated that identities had not shifted in all cases; rather people had begun to perceive a threat to their identity as it had evolved, for various reasons. *Comprehensive data treatment* requires researchers to examine the data thoroughly prior to drawing conclusions, to counter the potential for anecdotalism. Since we used the NVivo software and engaged in constant comparison, we were able to inspect all data thoroughly. As such, we were able to ensure that our theoretical model is an integrated model that describes the turnover sensemaking generally, instead of an element that only occurred in a few cases.

Deviant case analysis requires researchers to examine all cases in which the findings are substantially different, and determine the underlying reasons. If researchers perform comprehensive data treatment, it implies that they have actively sought out incongruities or deviant cases. This process helped us to put our provisional analytical scheme through the rigors of discrepant cases until we were able to come up with a small set of recursive rules that would incorporate all the data our analysis. Although no cases refuted our model, a few cases suggested some boundary conditions, which we specify when discussing our findings below. Finally, *respondent validation*, also known as member checks (Creswell, 2007), involves going back to some informants to seek their assistance in validating the findings that emerged from the data. We shared the findings of our study with 15 informants throughout our analysis, asking them to comment on our interpretation and the validity of our overall model. We report that our data interpretation and findings resonated well with our informants, which strengthens validity.

After final themes were identified, the first three authors coded themes in each interview as follows. We randomly selected five interviews and each coded them independently. Inter-rater agreement on the themes was approximately 90%. We then met to discuss the themes as a group, and repeated this process twice. Given that inter-rater agreement was approaching 100%

in our final meeting, the remaining interviews were coded by at least one author.

FINDINGS

When informants perceived threat from jobs to their holistic psychological wellbeing and positive, congruent identities across life domains, it resulted in cycles of strain and coping, and the cycles continued across turnover incidents. Our findings suggest that individuals stay in jobs that allow for expression of congruent identity across life domains and foster holistic psychological wellbeing, in some cases despite job dissatisfaction and negative shocks. These primary findings are reflected in the model depicted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Although the findings are explicated below using the organizing structure of Figure 1, the process through which findings emerged was iterative and messy, involving work with the data and frequent reconsideration of entire respondent narratives. In discussing our findings, we focus on what was most insightful given extant literature and what was mentioned most by informants; although we heard from informants about content and processes modeled by extant theories, we do not focus on them. During the data analysis process, we engaged in exploration of diverse research literatures in order to understand the constructs that were emerging as central to retention and turnover for our informants. The model that emerged contains elements from diverse and cross-disciplinary literatures, including those related to both domain-specific and holistic identity construction (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Farmer & van Dyne, 2010; LaGuardia, 2009; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Vignoles, Ragalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006), identity threat and coping (e.g., Breakwell, 1986; Elsbach, 2003), stress, strain, and coping (e.g., Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Griffin & Clarke, 2011; Hobfall, 1989; Quick &

Tetrick, 2011), psychophysiology in organizations (e.g., Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Unden, Orth-Gomer, & Elofsson, 1991), adult life span development (e.g., Levinson, 1978; Super, 1990), and wellbeing and motivation (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008; Diener, Scollan, & Lucas, 2009; Ryff, 1989). The model brings constructs from these literatures together in a new way to explicate their role in retention and turnover processes over time.

Core Elements of Identity Construction and Psychological Wellbeing across Life Domains

For our informants, when something about the job came to be understood as conflicting with pursuit of one or more core elements of identity construction and psychological wellbeing across life domains, they experienced it as a threat. Ryff and colleagues (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff, 1989) show that psychological wellbeing results from successfully managing six existential challenges encountered in life. Vignoles et al. (2006) demonstrate that six motives drive identity construction. To the best of our knowledge, these two models developed separately, yet their similarities are striking and overlap our findings, as demonstrated in Table 2 (also see Ashforth et al., 2008). The first column of Table 2 lists the labels and definitions we use here for the core elements of identity and wellbeing reported by our informants: purpose, trajectory, relatedness, expression, acceptance, and differentiation (PTREAD). The labels and definitions were chosen because they best reflected concepts in the data as informants explained their decisions to stay in or leave jobs. The next two columns of Table 2 list similar terms and definitions used by Ryff and colleagues and Vignoles and colleagues.

 Insert Table 2 about here

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) posits that individuals strive to build key resources throughout life that make their lives fulfilling and enjoyable. When people

experience a surplus of these resources, they experience positive wellbeing; when they experience inability to gain these resources, they experience stress or a lack of wellbeing (Hobfoll, 1989: 517; see reviews in Cooper, Quick, & Schabracq, 2009; Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Quick & Tetrick, 2011). This theory posits that much human behavior is explained by attempts to build, protect, gain, or prevent the loss of these key resources. Resources can be categorized as primary or secondary, where secondary resources are valued because of their potential to contribute to building one or more primary resources (Griffin & Clarke, 2011). Primary resources include those related to one's identity and the protection and enhancement of the self (Hobfoll, 1989), similar to the PTREAD elements. Thus wellbeing and identity, although separate concepts, may be related through core resource motivations.

From this perspective, a job is a secondary resource, one mode through which primary resources can be built, maintained, and enhanced. The notion of jobs as instrumental to life purposes is a relatively unexplored in management literatures (Budd, 2011; George & Jones, 1996). Our data suggest that jobs may be instrumental to building PTREAD elements and that threat from jobs to PTREAD elements across life domains contributes to turnover independent of job satisfaction. Although underexplored generally, these findings are in line with one study of which we are aware, which explored instrumental aspects along with job dissatisfaction (George & Jones, 1996), and another featuring identity strain (Kraimer et al., 2012) in turnover processes.

Much identity research explores issues separately in one domain; for example, formation of the identity of doctor (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) or father (Roy, 2006). However, each individual strives for a coherent sense of self, values, and purpose and for a holistic or congruent sense of her or his life across life domains as well (Ashforth et al., 2008 ; Deci & Ryan, 2008; LaGuardia, 2009). For our informants who voluntarily quit jobs, those jobs came to

be perceived as threatening core elements of this holistic identity. For many informants, the job threatened some core elements while facilitating others, making the decision to leave difficult, and in many cases keeping informants in their jobs through cycles of coping with identity strain.

Life course (e.g., Super, 1990), self (e.g., Farmer & van Dyne, 2010), role and identity (Ashforth et al., 2008), and meaning of work literatures (e.g., Budd, 2011; Dik et al., 2009) suggest that jobs are also valued because of interactions with other domains of life. Super (1990) and Levinson (1978) described major life domains derived from research, and these are similar to the primary domains in wellbeing and life satisfaction literatures (Andrews & Robinson, 1991; Diener, Scollan, & Lucas, 2009). Common domains of life across these literatures include: (a) job / career / work, (b) social / family / marriage / support, (c) income / wealth / financial / standard of living, (d) leisure / recreation / fun, (e) mental, physical, and spiritual health, and (f) community / housing/ safety, and some models also include (g) education.

Individuals construct identities and lives comprised of subsets of these domains (Famer & van Dyne, 2010). A challenge over a life course is to construct a life that facilitates involvement in all desired domains concurrently or over time. A job that facilitates involvement in desired domains contributes to wellbeing. Individuals build identity through involvement in multiple domains, and identity in one domain influences that in others (Elsbach, 2003). For our informants, jobs were perceived as threats to work/career and family/social domains more than to other domains, however all the domains listed (a) through (g) above, came into retention and turnover considerations for more than one informant.

We coded the six PTREAD elements and the seven life domains listed (a) through (g) above for each informant's case. Most informants reported multiple elements across multiple life domains. In reporting *verbatim* examples below, we identify each informant case by number

only, to ensure confidentiality. We highlight several examples for each core element in Table 3, and for different life domains in Table 4, in addition to the *in vivo* codes in Table 1. However, we regret that many other rich examples were left out due to space considerations.

 Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

Threats to PTREAD elements contributed to turnover, and when jobs facilitated all or most PTREAD elements, it led to engaged retention. For example, one informant who left primarily because of a threat to relatedness indicated that at the same time his job contributed to elements such as acceptance and purpose, which kept him engaged for a long time: “I personally felt...it was very hard to leave...I felt very invested in my organization [and]...some of those products” (3i02). In a few cases, identity also included a broader social identity, including age or life stage as key to deciding to stay or quit. For example, our youngest informant said, “age, and place in life,...where you are right now” was important to his decision to stay at his job (Si06).

As these constructs emerged, we noted that they were different from content elements in extant models. In fact, in several cases informants explicitly emphasized that they were satisfied with their jobs or that the jobs were good jobs, but staying in the job nonetheless came to be perceived as a threat to identity or wellbeing. For example, one manager reported:

It’s not because of the company.... I kept thinking if I find the right environment, I’ll be happy. [But] it’s not about the environment anymore. I finally realized, okay...I’m really good at what I do. I’m really good at organizing. I’m really good at managing client relationships. [But]...I don’t enjoy [it].... (3i13)

She was exploring other careers and life domains, and her decision to pursue new jobs was impacted by this holistic sense of self in her whole life. Analogously, a stayer with job dissatisfaction who had experienced many shocks stayed, in part, because his job facilitated PTREAD elements. He put it this way: “I can go through a lot of grief at work just knowing

that I'm going to have that time with my kids...." (Si06).

Threat to PTREAD elements was different for our informants from dissatisfaction with job facets. As one example, many individuals were striving to grow while maintaining a sense of their holistic life trajectory, and this element was different from the promotion/advancement facet that has been emphasized in past research. Several informants mentioned not caring about promotion. One man took a sabbatical rather than another job and said he spent it "obtaining other skills" because he wanted to grow (1i10) and another informant told us she didn't want a promotion, but she did want to keep learning and growing: "... at the time, I had [learned] all I thought I could" (1i12). A less frequent variation of this was to want an organization that was willing to grow and develop, and growing from that affiliation. Several informants cited the lack of willingness of the organization or its leaders to risk, learn, and grow. Analogously, the opportunity to grow was a pull into new jobs, as one respondent illustrates: "... they really encourage risk-taking and bringing up new ideas and having them be heard...." (1i06).

Similarly, threat to the PTREAD element relatedness was different from dissatisfaction with manager or co-workers. Relatedness was broader, including relatedness at work with managers, co-workers, clients and customers, and also non-work relatedness with partners, children, friends, and in a community. Threat to relatedness specific to work included sub-themes, such as threat due to the culture of the organization preventing relatedness. Relatedness was threatened for our informants by working in organizations where people were laid off without kindness or civility while executives were still spending money lavishly (5i23), where people were treated poorly (3i19) or humiliated (1i08), or where some social identities were not accepted (examples in our data set include age, family status, gender, and ethnic identities), even when informants themselves were not the targets of this treatment, similar to other research

findings (e.g., Krackhardt & Porter, 1985). In other cases, it was a lack of warmth or “humanness” that threatened this core element.

Relatedness was also cited frequently by our informants as leading to engaged retention. For example, one informant told us that he stayed so long in part because his “group was very solid and I love the way [we] performed as a whole. It was just a great group to work with” (3i02). As well as managers and co-workers, relatedness was also with customers or clients, as in this example from an education-related industry stayer who had high job dissatisfaction but also high facilitation of PTREAD elements in his job across life domains:

I’m courteous to the parents if there’s a parent out there. And the kids, I try to be courteous to them, and fair and firm.... So that makes you feel good when [they] appreciate you....(Si06).

Finally, informants also cited how work impacted their non-work relatedness as a reason to stay or leave. In addition to examples in Table 3, for example one woman cited her marriage, which was diminishing in quality in part because her husband also worked at the same company:

...as much as we tried not to talk about it, it was what we did for eight hours in the day so you come home and talk about it for [another] two or three hours.... I needed, and he needed, and our relationship needed to have something besides [this] in it. (3i13).

Although core PTREAD elements are separable, they are interrelated well (Keyes et al., 2002), and this was reflected in our data. A subset of our informants blended elements, especially in cases of threats from the job to acceptance, expression, and differentiation. For example, when asked why she left, one woman reflected acceptance and differentiation in wanting to be seen for who she felt she truly was and also to be able to express it. This example also demonstrates explicitly the link between identity and wellbeing.

I am a very loyal person. I never abuse [privileges]. I always work extra time. Never abuse...I just don’t do that. I would never take a day of vacation without marking it down.... [Because I was treated as if I would], I got real depressed. I had to go to the

doctor and I have never been depressed in my life. I mean [I've] always [been a] happy person. (3i19)

Another informant cited holistic identity directly, rather than any one PTREAD element:

I think when you come back for the MBA you focus, for me anyway... I focus more on ... getting it right the second time...focusing more on my true identity and matching my professional identity to who I really am. (FG2)

Many informants raised the threat of the job to their work or career identities and sense of work-related wellbeing. Because a career involves a person's work experiences over time and many work experiences are in jobs, these three concepts—work, job, and career—are closely intertwined, yet not the same (Feldman & Ng, 2007). Our data suggest the three can be at odds; specifically, that a job can threaten one's work or career identity or one's sense of wellbeing related to the work or career domain, as illustrated in Table 4.

Some life domains blend in Table 4 because informants frequently discussed them in tandem. Several informants mentioned seeing themselves as more than their work and family roles, and talked about how their jobs made it difficult to live out any other dimensions. Similarly, some stayers stayed in current jobs in part because of the job's impact on their ability to have outside interests, such as an informant who stayed in part because it allowed for his desired mix of job, family, and recreation: "I love the outdoors. I love to camp, I love to hunt... I do a little fishing.... I like to go boating...kayaks...." (Si06). In some cases, the job was perceived to threaten mental and physical health, and for fewer of our informants spiritual or religious health, or ability to perform citizenship behaviors, as in the examples in Table 4.

General Assessment of Identity and Wellbeing and Perceived Threat

In socio-cognitive models of strain, ongoing interaction of person and environments results in an assessment of stressors, termed "primary appraisals" (Griffin & Clarke, 2011). General assessments of PTREAD elements in our data is similar to primary appraisals in that

they were assessments of ongoing interaction between our informants and their environments. In some cases, a threat event triggered the general assessment, and in other cases, periodic ongoing assessment was routinely undertaken by the informant, alone or with a family member or friend, which then revealed a threat. Whether periodic general assessments are undertaken or not may depend on the individuals' personality and habits. In psychology, identity is conceptualized as a "system of affective cognitive structures (i.e., schemata) that organize and lend coherence to...self-relevant [life experiences]" and similarly in sociology the self is conceptualized as the result of relationships with others in different life domains (Farmer & Van Dyne, 2010: 504). Thus, sensemaking processes with the self as target are both analytic and synthetic; people form identities in separate life domains but healthy individuals also need to put these together in a narrative that allows for a self with a coherent, holistic, and congruent set of purposes, meanings, and values (Ashforth et al., 2008; LaGuardia, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is threat to this synthetic sense of identity and life that our informants perceived. We adopt the term general assessment to indicate a concept similar to primary appraisal concept in stress models; that is to indicate ongoing assessment of individuals in environments.

The concept of threat comes from literatures on social and work identities (e.g., Breakwell, 1986; Elsbach, 2003), and our data suggests that threat can arise from jobs to identity and wellbeing. COR theory categorizes perceived threats as actual resource loss, potential resource loss, and failure to gain expected resources. We coded each case for types of threat and highlight examples for each type in Table 5.

 Insert Table 5 about here

Psychophysiological Strain from Threats and Model Boundary Conditions

Our informants reported mental and physical strain due to assessments of threats at widely differing levels of intensity. Occupational health literatures explicate the process through which psychological factors impact health at varying levels (e.g., Cooper, Quick, & Schabracq, 2009; Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Quick & Tetrick, 2011). Here we focus only on elements that arose in our interviews. The prevalence of strain in our data was somewhat surprising, given the sequential, rational approach of extant turnover models. However, as others have noted, management scholars tend to attempt to understand organizational behavior in terms of cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors, and less in terms of emotion, health, and physiology (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Uden et al., 1991). This may have caused us to overlook the importance of psychophysiological strain in retention and turnover decisions.

All informants reported general assessments of identity and wellbeing across life domains; 58 of our 59 informants reported experiencing threats and coping; and 57 of 59 reported mental and physical strains. One stayer reported positive general assessments and did not experience strain or coping because she felt her job matched her identity so well. She reported feeling that she was “the perfect one to do” that job (Si02). All other informants, including all other stayers, reported some level of threat and coping. However, one additional informant, a leaver, reported no strain because although she had experienced the job as a threat to PTREAD elements across life domains, this did not result in strain because she had a long-held plan to move on to another opportunity. She had engaged in cycles of coping with threat to PTREAD elements, so the other features of the model held for her.

This leads us to posit three boundary conditions for our model. First, having no sense of threat from the job to core identity and wellbeing across life domains will result in a satisfactory assessment with no sense of identity or wellbeing threat or strain. Second, even with threat,

having a concrete alternative that is highly congruent with identity and wellbeing may lead to coping without mental or physical strain. Third, we expect the level or intensity of strain to be generally congruent with the perceived acuteness of the threat.

Acute threats are characterized by intensive emotions such as fear, anger, and despair, and are accompanied by physical reactions such as trembling, vomiting, or headaches (Kleber & van der Velden, 2009: 272-273) and in some cases even severe depression and suicide (Breakwell, 1986). In our data, few informants experienced the highest levels of strain, however many experienced severe strain, and reported feeling paranoid or depressed, accompanied by physical symptoms such as getting sick enough to go to the hospital and having insomnia. Below we provide examples in which informants experienced severe psychophysiological strain. Although these cases were striking because of the extent of the strain, they were not the only cases in which strain was this high. The following informants are from different organizations, and represent a mix of men and women across age categories and professions.

I quit over there because I was under so much pressure...that I ended up in the hospital in the emergency ward.I had a pain in my chest and my left arm was getting numb. ...I spent eight hours in the emergency room. I was ... on my way to work in the morning.... I called my doctor, and he said go directly to the emergency room. (3i11)

I mean literally, every night I would come home, probably for the last four or five months and I'd rant and rave at home and then I'd end up crying.... It took me almost two and a half months [after leaving] to finally lose the tension in my shoulders. (4i10)

I found myself dreading walking into the building...and practically frozen to turn on the computer, knowing there was going to be any number of messages from [my boss] just waiting for me.... This isn't the way it was supposed to be. I had...income. I had severance from [a previous company]. ...we were in the dollars. Had a very high visibility position. But it just got so wearing and so nerve-wracking.... (5i57)

I hated getting up in the morning. I just dreaded it. My husband was like, you have to get up. And I'm like, I don't want to get up. I'm not going. (3i13)

You just want to strangle someone (Si07).

Similarly, we expect mild threats to result in mild strain. Examples from our research include feelings of frustration, disillusionment, and restlessness, with milder physical reactions, such as lower energy levels, accompanying them. Informants generally mentioned either mental or physical strain first, but these were tied together. One stayer talked first about physical strain, saying, “It’s always like a burden; it’s always something, like huge stones sitting on my chest....a great heaviness.... I went to see a doctor because of it” (Si04). Another stayer had experienced coping cycles and strain related to a prior job. He explained:

I’ve had positions where I’ve felt physically sick going to work... the closer I got to work, I would just start to feel the knot in my stomach and...an upset stomach kind of feeling and just, I could almost feel my body sort of resisting, trying to push back on the car. “Don’t get any closer” kind of thing. So, it was a physical reaction (Si08).

Although varying considerably, frequencies and levels of psychophysiological strain were higher than we expected based on extant models. We believe the psychological safety created in our interviews allowed this potentially socially undesirable self-admission to surface. This finding is important in that it may explain why similar levels of job dissatisfaction and the same shocks affect different people differently, and the same people differently over time. Strain is a health-related construct whereas job dissatisfaction is an attitude made up of affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements, and the two may be independent and interact. The relationship between these constructs is reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Warr, 1990).

Coping: Authenticity and Validation Checks

Occupational health psychology literatures contain many classifications of coping, the most prevalent of which is problem- and emotion-focused coping. However, this two-category classification rubric has many problems, including a confounding of emotion-focused coping with strain (Cooper, Quick, & Schabracq, 2009: 112). Another classification system proposed is intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup (Breakwell, 1986). Coping can also be characterized

as positive (e.g., social support, exercise, use of humor) and negative (e.g., inappropriate venting, alcohol abuse, negative spillover to family). In their review, Griffin and Clarke note that “a widely accepted definition of the content of coping responses has proved elusive” (2011: 376). Most of our informants used numerous of all these types of coping. However, the categories of coping most salient in our informants’ sensemaking processes reflect notions in identity formation literatures, in which possible selves are tested against personal gauges of both authenticity and validation (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). For example, our informants often used fantasy, reflection, and social-support-building, along with other types of coping. Informants who fantasized themselves in a new situation that then felt “more right” used this as a test of authenticity; reflection was also used as a check on authenticity; and informants who talked to others garnered social support as a form of validation.

Examples in our data include an informant who talked to a former colleague about opportunities, which in turn gave him social support and additional information with which to build fantasies of leaving and to reflect more deeply on his authentic identity. As well as illustrating the interaction between social support, fantasy, and reflection coping, this quote from him represents those in which informants were satisfied with jobs.

...it was a matter of looking at [the company] and the...satisfaction there, but thinking, “Well, this might...be your big chance.” And if you don’t take it—tough. You could be looking back five years from now and thinking “Oh my God, I could have been in there, I could have been part of that company.” And who knows? Maybe they’re going to be the next....big [industry] company that takes off.... (5i48)

Fantasy is characterized by creative and free imagining; picturing or visualizing oneself in a situation—what it would be like, and has been shown to be related to identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1987). In our informants, fantasies were of leaving itself, actual or imagined alternatives, or what it would be like to stay, often projected far into the future. Social support

can buffer people from the negative impacts of strain (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Uden et al., 1991). Our informants garnered support as a way of coping through validation, sometimes initially for staying and often ultimately for leaving jobs. Support came from multiple sources including current and former colleagues, associates, and acquaintances in virtual communities, friends, and family members. Reflection on experience is a foundation of adult learning and development, and can occur in a number of ways, including writing, coaching, and forming goals and plans. Some informants mixed personal reflection through journaling or taking retreats into their coping strategies. This example, from a professional who had not left his job, illustrates this:

I've had these visions of what it might be like to be in that kind of situation.... I wrote out kind of almost like a letter, and I talked to [my wife] about it, what do you think...here are things I've been frustrated about.... I felt like this could happen.... I want to be ready. (Si07)

Informants also coped through negotiation with employers, research, and evaluation of alternatives, the latter of which is covered extensively in the extant literature, as well as other types of coping. As with other constructs in this research, we regret that many other rich examples were left out due to space considerations.

Two Levels of Cycles

Our informants experienced retention and turnover cyclically. In retrospect this is not surprising given the central roles that emerged for identity, strain, and coping. Both coping with strains and identity formation involve cycles (Ashforth et al., 2008; Griffin & Clarke, 2011; Pratt et al., 2006). Coping has been defined as thoughts and behaviors used to manage situations that are assessed as threats or stressors, where time spans are important, involving “a cyclical process of resource depletion and repair that unfolds from day to day and week to week” (Griffin & Clarke, 2011: 360).

Even in cases of turnover that at first appeared to be triggered spontaneously by a sudden event and follow a linear path, informants had engaged in earlier cycles of coping, in some cases going back decades and even back to prior jobs in former organizations. This is also illustrated by the case of Mr. Slater, the Jet Blue flight attendant, summarized at the beginning of this article. That case appeared to be spontaneous, precipitated by rude behavior on the part of a particular customer, but it was later revealed that Mr. Slater had been coping with threats from his job to PTREAD elements for some time, possibly for decades, and had experienced growing strain over time. Similarly, most of our informants experienced multiple coping cycles.

In fact, in a number of cases, informants initially gave one-dimensional, rational, work-facet-related or family-related answers to the primary research questions, adding qualifiers such as “actually it’s a bit of a story” (5i48) or “it’s a long history” (4i10). This may shed light on why earlier models explain a modest level of turnover. In many cases, our informants’ initial rational responses belied their much more complex, cyclical, and deeply emotional reasons for staying or leaving. We asked about the “bit of story” and “long history,” but had the sense that some informants would not have revealed these deeper levels had we not specifically asked what they meant by these phrases. This may be because in the U.S. world of work, rational, emotionally neutral expressions are valued over emotionally expressive ones. This also reflects underlying assumptions about what work “should” mean versus what it actually does mean to human beings (Budd, 2011; Dik et al., 2009; Markman et al., 2013). This assumption-reality disconnect may lead to a situation in which employers are told only part of what causes turnover. In our interviews, as psychological safety was built and interest was shown in all aspects of their stories by researchers, these deeper, more emotional, cyclical aspects were brought forth.

For our informants, having experienced cycles changed future experiences of threats,

assessments, and coping. Thus cycles are not independent, but cumulative over time. In many of our informants, repeated cycles of coping with threat, and the resultant mental and physical strain, “set the table” for turnover. In other cases, having experienced these cycles once sped up processing the next cycle, resulting in a cumulative process in which informants learned more about themselves, their identity and wellbeing, and their response to threats.

Cycles of coping during retention. An example of coping cycles while staying comes from a man for whom previous cycles over many years played an important role in his final exit. In his case, treatment received from his manager had triggered a threat to PTREAD elements of acceptance and relatedness resulting in mental strain and physical symptoms—in his case insomnia—a number of times. However, the PTREAD elements of expression and purpose were met in the job, so there were factors in his job that also led him to stay, which he did for years, undergoing multiple rounds of coping with perceived threat and mental and physical strain. However, the accumulation of strain from cycles built until he chose to leave. He expressed his final coping cycle as involving “a ton of pain” (3i02) reflecting his previous cycles. Another informant described cycles this way:

... talking about, “Why in the world are we doing this?” And then we just kind of joked about it.... And the next year the same thing happened. And then we started thinking about that a lot more seriously and say, “Really, why are we doing this?” (1i04)

Other informants spoke of cycles that “continually brought it up,” which resulted in “wave upon wave upon wave” of dealing with turnover decisions (1i10), or talked about getting “energized again and then frustrated again” (Si07).

Cycles of coping across turnover episodes. Most extant models of turnover are sequential, ending with turnover itself. Turnover and socialization have been studied as separate phenomenon. In contrast, our data supports the findings from at least one other study that the

phenomena are portable across jobs (Boswell et al., 2005). Our informants carried the impact of coping with threats to identity and wellbeing into their next jobs, and into other situations such as starting their own businesses or taking a sabbatical. We heard from many informants in new positions that sensemaking cycles were ongoing, as with the informant who said, “I have already started to look again because I think that at this point in my life, I’m not going to do this for too long a period of time” (1i10) and another who explained that she had only traded one threat to her wellbeing for another in deciding to stay home full-time:

Now the novelty has worn off and I am thinking I have to go out there and do something... I am almost thinking of going to school and learning some technical job that I could maybe work part-time [or maybe] full-time.

Relationship of Identity and Wellbeing Strain to Job Dissatisfaction and Intention to Quit

In reviewing our findings above, we focused on new concepts. However, we also found evidence in line with extant models of turnover, which emphasize job dissatisfaction, shocks, and intention to quit preceding quitting, and of an interrelationship between identity and wellbeing cycles and strain with these elements. These interrelationships are depicted in Figure 1.

Many of our informants were satisfied with their jobs but perceived threats to identity or wellbeing. For others, job dissatisfaction developed alongside identity and wellbeing strain. Although our study was not intended to explicate this, based our data we expect that job dissatisfaction and threats to PTREAD elements each independently explain turnover and interact, as some preliminary research on wellbeing or life satisfaction and turnover suggests (e.g., Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012; Rothausen, Larson, & Christenson, 2012; Wright & Bonett, 2007). Interactions for our informants primarily took the form of escalating levels of strain and experiences processing general assessments and threat. Once an individual had experienced a cycle, future cycles were experienced differently, with an escalating effect.

Based on our data, we expect that the greater number of cycles an individual has experienced, the more coping with identity and wellbeing threat they have done, and the greater their levels of strain, the more likely it is that job dissatisfaction will lead to intention to quit, intention to quit to actual quitting behavior, and events or shocks to quitting, as illustrated in Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

We sought to understand the meaning to employees of staying in or leaving organizations. We adopted the grounded theory methodology and collected data using primarily in-depth interviews and secondarily focus groups. As reviewed above, extant turnover models are based on common foundational assumptions and methods. Grounded theory allows for investigation of understudied aspects of phenomenon in order to build new or expand extant theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition, as Gephart (2004: 455) notes, “The depiction and understanding of the meaning of organization members is important in itself and this task is often neglected in organizational research.”

Our findings suggest that employees engaged in ongoing general assessments of core elements of positive, congruent identity and holistic wellbeing—PTREAD elements. Positive assessment resulted in engaged retention. Threats to PTREAD elements resulted in cycles of coping, usually accompanied by parallel levels of strain, which ultimately resulted in less engaged retention and/or turnover. Coping occurred in cycles lasting from days to decades while individuals stayed in jobs, and continued across turnover incidents. Informants stayed in jobs that allowed for expression of congruent identity across life domains and that fostered holistic psychological wellbeing, even when dissatisfied with the job per se. Our findings suggest how shocks may be processed through the filters of identity and wellbeing, that strain and coping moderate the relationships between job dissatisfaction and turnover, and that cycles of coping

with identity and wellbeing threat continue across job and organization transitions. This research makes several contributions. The central contribution is that it describes employee sensemaking about retention and turnover, which in turn facilitates other contributions that extend turnover models by identifying four distinct categories of factors that have been underexplored in turnover research: threat to and general assessment of PTREAD elements of identity and wellbeing across life domains, the role of psychophysiological strain, coping during retention and across turnover episodes, and cyclical processes.

First, we find that from employees' perspectives, turnover is part of identity construction or identity work, and this work is integral to psychological wellbeing across the life span. Other researchers have explicated identity work and wellbeing processes (Ibarra & Barbalescu, 2010; Ryff, 1989; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Vignoles et al., 2006) and identity is a focus of increasing research in management literatures, where types of identity have been differentiated (Ashforth et al., 2008). However few studies have explored positive, congruent identity across life or have brought identity to bear on turnover (for an exception see Kraimer et al., 2012). Similarly, only a few studies have examined the impact of wellbeing on turnover above and beyond the impact of job satisfaction (e.g., Rothausen et al., 2012; Wright & Bonett, 2007). Yet our findings suggest that identity and wellbeing may be foundational to explaining turnover.

Second, our findings are the first of which we are aware to reveal a central role for psychophysiological strain in a general turnover model, although strain has been found in population-specific models (de Croon et al., 2004; Kraimer et al., 2012), and one survey of 13,000 employees found that workers most often cited ongoing stress or strain as the primary reason for leaving their jobs, although employers reported perceiving the most common reason being dissatisfaction with pay (Ruiz, 2007). Strain can run emotionally deep, perhaps because

primary resources are threatened (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus, 2000). Many of our informants reported that job dissatisfaction played a role as well; however it was when the job was perceived as threatening identity or wellbeing that they developed psychophysiological strain.

Third, our model shows that coping is integral to retention and turnover. Leavers coped in multiple ways both before and notably, after they quit and were in new jobs, and stayers were also coping in these ways. Our informants coped in many ways, including ways that allowed them to “experiment publicly with provisional identities that serve as trials for possible future selves” (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010: 136). One other study of which we are aware also found coping integral in turnover (Wright & Bonett, 1993).

Fourth, our findings highlight the cyclical nature of sensemaking about voluntary retention and turnover, complementing the more linear nature of the turnover paths prevalent in extant models. Since stress, emotions, and cognitions interact with and influence one another, it seems likely that sequential, linear extant models and this cyclical model interact and influence each other, as depicted in Figure 1. Cyclical assessment and coping models are not prevalent in the management literature on turnover, and our findings suggest that this approach to understanding turnover is worthy of additional attention. Scholars have suggested that preparation for significant role changes related to identity “may begin long before an actual role change” (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010: 137), and our findings support this.

Fifth, the use of a qualitative methodology to examine retention and turnover constitutes a methodological contribution. Our data offer a number of advantages that enrich our contribution in ways that would be difficult with quantitative methodologies. Our data allowed us to explore retention and turnover together, whereas turnover has generally been studied with less attention paid to those who stay. Our methodology comprised collecting and analyzing both

post hoc and *in situ* data. Finally, use of qualitative methodologies is especially important because of the dual biases toward rational and cognitive explanations for organizational behavior, and for organizational constructs to be featured in much management research (Gerhart, 2004; Weiss & Rupp, 2011). When explaining phenomena, employees are aware of their audiences, and focus on building validation for their stories from their target audience. In the U.S. business world, rational, emotionally neutral, and transactional explanations are favored. Many of the stories we heard, from more benign stories of struggling to integrate life identities, to more sensitive stories about abusive managers, sexual harassment, and management practices bordering on unethical and certainly uncivil, may not have been revealed by informants without the time we invested in developing psychological safety and relationship.

In our work to understand retention and turnover sensemaking, we found that identity construction and psychological wellbeing have related core elements (please refer to Table 2). As well as implications for retention and turnover, we believe these elements may impact other work-related phenomena. Although self-acceptance or esteem has been thoroughly explored, the remaining five elements may have been underexplored (Ashforth et al., 2008; Vignoles et al., 2006). Expanding interest in meaningful work, callings, and eudaimonic job satisfaction may relate to these elements (Dik et al., 2009; Rothausen et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Our findings contribute to literatures on identity, psychophysiology, and the dark side of organizational behavior. As others have noted, how people form work and other identities is the focus of a growing stream of research (Ashforth et al., 2013; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Our study contributes additional empirical evidence of how identity impacts organizational behavior. Our methodology also allowed us to shed light on one way organization can have negative impacts on physical and mental health, in addition to their potential for positive impacts (Danna

& Griffin, 1999; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). Related to this, our work contributes evidence of the dark side of organizational behavior. Scholars are beginning to categorize dark side behaviors, which include harassment, discrimination, injustice, negative political behavior, and incivility, among others (Griffin & O'Leary-Kelly, 2004). We found evidence of these behaviors in the stories told by our informants, as represented in some of the examples in Tables 3, 4, and 5. One model of mistreatment in jobs suggests that sensemaking about such treatment may be a cyclical process (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008), and our findings suggests that the cyclical processing of mistreatment may fold into the cyclical considerations of decisions to quit.

Limitations

All samples are limited including ours. Our informants had left or were working for organizations in one geographic region. Although three of our informants moved from the region upon quitting, that most had not suggests that the model might not apply to more mobile employees, although findings for expatriates suggests that it may (Kraimer et al., 2012). Future research should test this model in multiple geographic areas and for mobile employees. Another salient limitation of our sample is that evidence suggests that all but two informants were strong performers. Others have shown that leaving differs by performance levels (Salamin & Hom, 2005; Shaw et al., 2009), and we cannot say whether this model would apply to poor performers.

Perhaps of greater concern is that all informants volunteered for the interviews, and it is possible they may have had a common motivation for doing so, and that reason could be related to our findings. For example, perhaps they experienced more strain or were more emotional about their turnover experiences. We acknowledge this limitation, but argue that the likelihood of finding these constructs to be important to retention and turnover sensemaking in this diverse a sample—across different organization types and sizes, organization levels, reasons for leaving,

and destinations upon leaving, and across age, family status, gender, and job categories, and in leavers and stayers—is unlikely if the phenomena are not important to a broader population of employees. In addition, we suggest that it may be just such emotionally engaged, high performing employees who are the targets of much retention work in organizations.

Our data was of a single-informant, direct-report nature, primarily in-depth interviews. Social scientists have noted both advantages and limitations to single informant interviews (Snow & Anderson, 1987). One key limitation is that interviews about a past experience can include *post hoc* rationalizations of choices and decisions. We partially addressed this by gathering *in situ* data about leavers' current situations and interviewing stayers. Interviews also have advantages in that they tap actors' perceptions and sensemaking. Along with others (e.g., Gephart, 2004), we believe this perspective has value. In addition, revealing the role of emotions and strain may be more appropriately done with in-depth self-report than with other types of data, because researchers may not be reliable judges of emotions in informants (Dimburg, Andreasson, & Thunberg, 2011). These considerations do pose challenges for future research on this model, which we nonetheless encourage, and which we address in the next section.

Implications for Future Research

This model posits relationships between constructs that have not been central in turnover research, and should be replicated using multiple methodologies. For example, based on our findings, we expect that: individuals with lower levels of wellbeing will be more likely to turnover at similar levels of job dissatisfaction, as also suggested by some research (e.g., Rothausen et al., 2012; Wright and Bonett, 2007); perceived threat from the job to the PTREAD elements will predict turnover; strain levels moderate the relationships between job dissatisfaction and intention to quit, and between intention to quit and actual turnover, as some

evidence suggests (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2012) and will moderate the effect of shocks; the number and intensity of cycles experienced will impact turnover; and effects of strain will be portable across jobs, as some other evidence suggests (e.g., Boswell et al., 2005). We hope researchers will explore these findings, and encourage them to keep in mind the social desirability in many organizational settings toward cognitive, rational, and linear explanations.

Coping cycles are notoriously difficult to study with survey methodologies (Lazarus, 2000) and this is likely also true for cyclical coping with identity and wellbeing strain. One way to study the cyclical, cumulative nature may be diary methodology, whereby an identified sample of employees is asked to indicate their levels of strain and coping strategies at either random or regularly scheduled times. Other studies could develop measures of the key constructs in our model based on *in vivo* phrases such as those identified in Table 1 as well as existing similar measures from the identity construction, psychological wellbeing, stress and coping, and psychophysiology literatures, to test these relationships.

Other elements likely play a role in how individuals experience these cycles. One key set of factors that should be explored is individual differences, which are important in other strain and coping cycles (Lazarus, 2000). Individual differences likely to moderate our model include levels of self-awareness, physiological resiliency, and openness to new experiences.

Practical Implications

Proactive turnover, retention, and exit management is one of twelve significantly growing high performance work practices (Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, & Campion, 2013). Our findings suggest new directions for this practice. Where retention is desired, jobs and organizations should be designed, managed, and led to cultivate what could be termed an “ecosystem of engaged retention” that would consider employees’ perspectives, in a move

toward management that is more compassionate toward employees. Organizations could purposefully build support for employees' PTREAD elements across life domains. Some of this may be accomplished by job design, including attention to the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) such that employees understand the significance of their work. However, based on our data, attention should also be paid to training managers and leaders to foster connections from jobs to significant elements of identity and wellbeing across life domains, to be aware of the signs that these connections are not clear to employees, and to designing and leading organizations with these connections in mind.

Our findings suggest there is lost opportunity for intervention as strain and coping cycles build. Many of our informants were looking for ways to stay. Organizations that proactively foster elements of personal identity and wellbeing across life domains, and address employee concerns that emerge from these types of considerations, will likely be able to improve retention of key employees. We note that this may require a fundamental shift toward building trust, open communications, and compassion in management (George, 2014).

Many PTREAD elements are under manager influence; some of our informants reported that things said by their managers impacted their identities and made them feel valued, or not valued, as individuals. A practical skill for retention management at this level is the ability to accurately read and respond to relevant cues, which is a skill in which people vary in ability, and some evidence suggests can be taught (Dimburg et al., 2011). This ability could be used in selection and development of managers where retention is desired.

Threat to core elements of identity and wellbeing across life domains could be measured and monitored, although this is not without significant challenges. One of the intriguing implications of our data is that many of the issues, though not all, were impacted in part by

informal cultural norms or behaviors that were likely either counter to organizational policies, or are likely to be either unseen, or if seen, to be viewed as idiosyncratic, irrelevant, or benign by leaders. However our informants saw them as patterns deriving systematically from organizations. Efforts to root out these things and explicitly manage them could result in lower turnover levels.

Finally, PTREAD assessments carry across organizations, thus socialization programs could be reconsidered with these factors in mind, in order to impact new employees' sensemaking about their identity and wellbeing related to new jobs. These findings also support interventions that address strain management such as EAP programs and on-campus exercise facilities.

Conclusion

Although we know much about turnover, our overall ability to understand and predict it is not as strong as it could be due in part to lack of attention to employee sensemaking. We find evidence to support the importance to retention and turnover of assessments of PTREAD elements of identity construction and psychological wellbeing, mental and physical strain, and coping, in repeated cycles over time. Understanding the impact of these underexplored aspects should help researchers to more fully model retention and turnover, and practitioners to more effectively manage it. By building a model grounded in the experiences of those who stay or leave, we hope to bring research and practice closer to more effective and compassionate management of turnover both for the individuals for whom it is a major life transition and organizations for which the time, energy, and resources devoted to employee replacement are significant.

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TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF *IN VIVO* CODES, CATEGORIES, AND THEMES

<i>In vivo</i> Code Examples	Examples of First Order Categories	Second order Themes	Theoretical Framework
It is just not me Am I losing a part of me? Not how was I raised I am a Using those gifts, as intended	Core self Identity Values Interests Abilities	Threat to identity	Threat to core elements of identity and wellbeing across life domains
Kids have long days in daycare Husband and I argued Conversations at dinner table Single Lot of hobbies Volunteering, reading to kids	Family Ongoing education Exercise Citizenship Community Education	Threat to wellbeing across life domains	
What would it be like Wanted something different This might be your big chance	Alternatives Imagining quitting Exploration	Fantasies	Coping (4 categories as examples)
Job sounded fairly interesting Informational interviewing This huge ad glared out at me	Reading Exploring Getting information	Researching	
Was I ready Felt less likely to have regrets It was realizing that if I wanted	Thinking Inner work Realization	Reflecting	
I talked to a number of former Said let's talk Ongoing conversation	Talking with network Support from spouse Support from friends	Social support	
Being torn apart High stress I was really discouraged So it created lots of anger	Frustration Dismay Depression Anxiety	Mental strain	Psycho-physiological strain
Could not get up in the morning So tired Sick to my stomach Tension in my shoulders	Low energy Fatigue Pain Illness	Physical strain	
Over many years Stop and think many times Peaks and valleys Half a year to a year	Intermittent thoughts Iterative comparison Periodic assessment Primary appraisals	Iterative Assessments	General Assessment

TABLE 2

CORE ELEMENTS IN IDENTITY AND WELLBEING

Source:	Ryff (1989) and Keyes et al. (2002)	Vignoles et al. (2006)
PTREAD Element Label and Definition	Psychological Wellbeing Element Label and Definition	Identity Construction Motive Label and Definition
<p>Purpose</p> <p>People's sense of the meaning, significance, or purpose of their lives</p>	<p>Purpose</p> <p>People strive to make meaning of their efforts and challenges</p>	<p>Meaning</p> <p>People strive to find significance or purpose in their existence</p>
<p>Trajectory</p> <p>People's sense of the past, current, and future coherence in growth and development of their talents and gifts over time in their lives</p>	<p>Growth</p> <p>People strive to make the most of their talents and capacities over time</p>	<p>Continuity</p> <p>People strive to maintain a sense of continuity across time and situation, while also allowing for change through progressions and turning points</p>
<p>Relatedness</p> <p>People's sense of connectedness to others, quality of and dignity in their relationships with others in their lives</p>	<p>Positive relationships</p> <p>People strive to develop, maintain, and be part of warm and trusting interpersonal relationships</p>	<p>Belonging</p> <p>People strive to maintain and enhance feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people in dyadic or group relationships</p>
<p>Expression</p> <p>People's sense of agency and competence in their talents and gifts being used to impact their environments and lives</p>	<p>Mastery</p> <p>People strive to shape their environment to meet personal needs and desires</p>	<p>Efficacy</p> <p>People strive to maintain and enhance feelings of competence and control</p>
<p>Acceptance</p> <p>People's sense of their ability to feel positive about who they are, with strengths and limitations, and about their decisions and actions in their lives</p>	<p>Self-acceptance</p> <p>People strive to feel good about themselves and accept their limitations</p>	<p>Self-esteem</p> <p>People strive to maintain and enhance a positive conception of self</p>
<p>Differentiation</p> <p>People's sense that their uniqueness is valued as individuals operating in social contexts with others people in their lives</p>	<p>Self-determination</p> <p>People strive to sustain individuality and autonomy in a larger social context</p>	<p>Distinctiveness</p> <p>People strive to establish and maintain a sense of differentiation from others</p>

TABLE 3

VERBATIM EXAMPLES OF THREATS TO CORE ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY AND WELLBEING

Element	Quotes
Purpose	So, my vision, which is kind of a combination of personal vision and business vision, is to create a more loving, god-centered world. And that's real important to me. And when I found that I was not in a position to be able to do that where I was, I decided to make a change. (1i02) [You] have to feel like you're working someplace where ...they are letting you make a difference (1i01).
Trajectory	...the administrative part, that holds no appeal for me—been there, done that. (1i02) I didn't feel that I was learning the things I needed to learn to make me a better businessperson (5i66). ...the last five years...I learned to keep my mouth shut because [of] that corporate culture. ...when I first came as a college graduate...I used to laugh at people who said they were afraid of managers... "Oh, I can't say that." I was the fearless college student and I felt like "I'm not scared of him!" [But] I learned how to be scared. [But] as soon as I left...within a week that fearlessness came back and it was just like...thank god. Thank god the real person that I know is still in there. (1i08)
Relatedness	It is very sad. ...worse because these are people I love and I care about who ...[others weren't treating well] (3i19). ...it was not a conducive place for being successful, [for] women...a little group of [male executives]...hung together and there were a number of instances over time where comments had been made.... At one point...there was one woman who was pregnant... One of [them] went up and started rubbing her belly, making comments about how she got that way. (4i08) [My]youngest...she's so different than her older sister...and she just needs time to really spend time with me and talk, which, I just didn't have that kind of time...you know, when I was [working at the company]" (1i12). [I] certainly give the job what I think it deserves, [but]...I've got friends, I try to see them every now and then (3i18).
Expression	It's so maddening because...I just beat my head up against the wall trying to figure out how to remedy this situation (1i01) It was frustrating. I also didn't feel like HR backed us up...I would work with HR and they would give me some guidance, but there was never...I don't think they were [really] working with me....(5i09)
Acceptance	I got to the point where I could not conscientiously represent the company anymore in the marketplace...very unethical (1i01). [There] still is prestige in working where I work. People find it fascinating, people know about it, people want to talk about it, people have an opinion about it. It is definitely a part of my identity. I am [name] who works at the [organization]... (Si05)
Differentiation	I want to be very valued in what I do and be allowed to do what...I have been told that I do well (Si02). ...a mindset that you are expendable... (3i08) ...[people were] absolutely seen as a resource and not an individual (4i01).

TABLE 4

VERBATIM EXAMPLES OF THREATS ACROSS LIFE DOMAINS

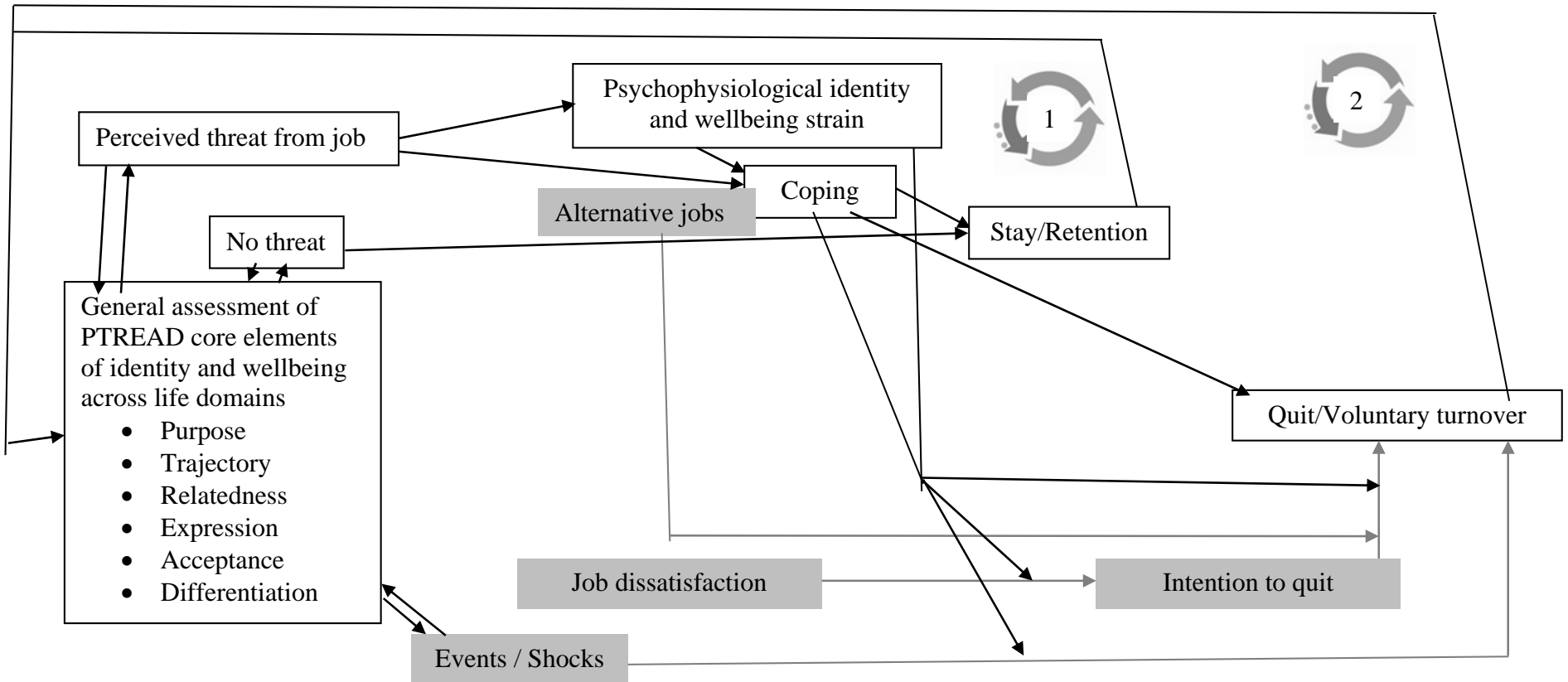
Domain	Quotes
Work / Career	<p>I generally worked for a manager high up and the people under him...throughout my career...[but] I was forced out of the position and...into what I call...babysitting.... We were actually told that, you know, “If your boss is used to having a piece of candy every day at two o’clock...and you are going to be gone, make sure you make a note of that so whoever backs you up can make sure he gets his piece of candy.” (3i19)</p> <p>The money was good but I still felt...I didn’t want to be like a secretary my whole life. Although the job I have now is real similar... somebody comes in for auto insurance, I can do it. I can change their vehicles. I can do all of that (1i67)</p> <p>I felt like I couldn’t be a leader in that organization, and be positive and represent the organization well (4i01)</p>
Social / Family (note interrelationships with other domains as well)	<p>... it’s... important for me, as she moves into...a very difficult stage of her life, that I am there for her... After a month or two she said, “I kind of like it that you’re home when I get here.” ...it helps in terms of activities, too. (1i02)</p> <p>I knew that we wanted a family and I just didn’t see me there and that happening together. I mean, I couldn’t even fathom putting the two together (1i04).</p> <p>I can’t get up to market working [in the old job]. The attorney market pays a lot more, but I don’t want to do that anymore. I have small kids. I have a family. I just needed a bump... It was time for me. ...I had little kids and we just sort of decided, “Well, you know, this is time for me to get out of practice and stop traveling so much” (5i20)</p>
Financial / standard of living	<p>I had a lot of problems with [the company] dealing with ...my husband’s layoff and the ...the financial stress.... We just bought a new house in [the suburbs]. I was wondering how we were going to pay for that (1i59)</p> <p>I felt like financially I had to leave.... (5i20)</p>
Leisure / Recreation; Health; Community / Citizenship; Education	<p>Well, it mostly relates to the kids but it’s the time for myself too. Things like getting to exercise, or getting to read, or getting to write... It’s about things that I need to do for me, to recharge my batteries (1i02)</p> <p>I have to relax and I have to rebuild my soul, I mean it was just, there’s nothing left (4i10)</p> <p>We have a lake home and we have a powerboat. ... we have not been together [there during] the summer (5i57)</p> <p>[I left the company because] I found a place in [a different town] where I wanted to live.... We were able to buy more up here than we could have.... So we have 80 acres. We never would have got to do that [had I stayed in my job] (1i67).</p> <p>How much time do you have for things like getting adequate sleep, times with friends, getting in some exercise so that you’re physically and spiritually healthy, especially since I had a husband now and before [he was my] fiancée.... (1i08).</p> <p>I [would like to] volunteer through my church, ...something like that, or even just spending time at elementary schools reading to kids, or...especially in the summertime, take a day to go biking or things like that (5i47)</p> <p>It was definitely a life balance issue. You were studying...you had to make time to study in the evenings after work...(1i08)</p>

TABLE 5
VERBATIM EXAMPLES OF THREAT CATEGORIES

Threat type perceived	Quotes
Actual loss	<p>I was really discouraged with where the organization was going from a vision and direction point of view and was losing respect for the leadership in the organization. (4i01)</p> <p>I didn't feel that there was a lot of direction. Like I said, the only word I can use is stagnant... I mean there just didn't seem like a lot of positive things going on in the department [anymore]... I didn't feel that at the time that I was getting enough support in what I was doing. (5i60)</p> <p>"Well, we gotta take away your overtime. You're losing your ... route." I don't know, I just felt like... after having been there for 11 years and I'd always been willing to work overtime and take whatever routes... always been willing to put in the time...I just felt like I was ... getting the shaft (Si06)</p>
Expected / potential loss	<p>I was on a project that was definitely going to end.... We had to post for positions and if there was nothing we wanted to do, well.... (1i59)</p> <p>The short answer was that I could see the handwriting on the wall. [My division] was having some major issues in terms of product, market, and basically a shrinking customer base. (3i08)</p> <p>We're continuing to rehash the same issues and in the same manner and not learning from the mistakes that we've made in the past. (4i01)</p>
Lack of potential gain	<p>I wanted to make a clean start. I had nothing against [the company] as a company at all. I thought it was a good place to work. I just kind of wanted something [else]. (5i47)</p> <p>I have a 50% chance since I ... run into every wall.... I felt okay, now it's like a 10% chance and the walls are getting really much bigger and thicker. (3i02)</p> <p>An opportunity came up, I mean I'd been thinking about trying to start my own business you know for a few year...it gave us a challenge of something that we've never done and you know I'm in my...mid 30's. And it just felt like, you know, if I'm going to do it, I may as well do it now. (4i02)</p>

FIGURE 1

PTREAD MODEL OF IDENTITY AND WELLBEING IN RETENTION AND TURNOVER



Note: Grey boxes and lines represent the dominant extant model of turnover. Unshaded boxes and lines represent the constructs and relationships identified in this research. Overlapping indicates that the shaded box is one example of the unshaded box. That is, evaluation of alternatives is one form of coping. Cycle 1 represents cycles of identity and wellbeing strain and coping while staying in the job; cycle 2 represents cycles of identity and wellbeing strain and coping across jobs and organizations.