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Pre- and Post-Termination Organizational Commitment and the Effects of Leaving

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research examining the attitudes of employees toward their employer after termination. We argue that post-termination organizational commitment by employees (in the form of affective commitment and organizational endorsement) is affected by the **past** actions of the organization, specifically those associated with the process of termination. This suggests that organizations have the ability to shape the attitudes that former employees have toward the company. In examining a sample of 171 former employees of a large manufacturing organization who left for a range of reasons, we found that post-termination commitment was predicted by organizational commitment while employed, perception of procedural justice in the layoff process, palatability of the reason for leaving, and personal ownership of the decision to leave.

Pre- and Post-Termination Organizational Commitment and the Effects of **the Manner of** Leaving

While the attitudes of layoff survivors toward their employer have been investigated (Grunberg, Anderson-Connolly, & Greenberg, 2000), there is a paucity of research examining the work attitudes of employees after termination. The few studies that have been conducted focus primarily on layoff victims (Brockner, et al., 1994; Wanberg, Bunce, & Gavin, 1999) rather than those who have left voluntarily. Moreover, no research attention has been focussed on the effects of the palatability of the reason for leaving and the ownership of the decision to leave. Palatability refers to the favorable or unfavorable evaluation that an individual has of the reason for leaving. Ownership refers to the feeling of having power and control in the decision-making around leaving. This study seeks to address this gap and also to contribute to work termination psychology by studying a unique sample: a group of employees who have left the organization in both voluntary and involuntary terminations. While the literature on work has used the word “termination” in relation to involuntary separations, such as layoffs, we believe that the word is descriptive of all employment endings, whether voluntary or involuntary.

We will examine continued commitment to the company after termination and the factors that affect such attitudes. We believe that experiences during the period of employment, as well as experiences during the termination process play a decisive role in determining post-termination attitude. Employers therefore have an important opportunity to influence how former employees feel about them. There are a number of reasons for why post-termination attitudes are important to study. First, in order to mitigate the risk of workplace violence, it is desirable to minimize the likelihood of strong negative emotions toward the company. Job termination has been associated with workplace violence (Karl & Hancock, 1999) and layoff

victims who perceive the layoff procedure as unfair display more anger at the time of the layoff (Bennett, Martin, Bies, & Brockner, 1995). Second, **the general welfare may be served if we can learn more about the relationship between the likelihood of filing lawsuits and company behavior during terminations. There is evidence that negative affect toward the organization and the perception that termination procedures are unfair is associated with a greater tendency for former employees to files suits** (Wanberg, Bunce & Gavin, 1999). **The evidence suggests that fair procedures is the most important factor in determining likelihood of bringing suit, and that interpersonal treatment by managers may also play a significant role** (Bies & Tyler, 1993). Third, knowing what factors contribute to a willingness to endorse the organization **by former employees** can help organizations promote favorable word-of-mouth recommendations and thus **enhance their** ability to recruit new employees as the need arises. It is important when hiring that companies have an enthusiastic labor pool available; a large body of disgruntled former workers may have a negative impact on hiring prospects. Fourth, **assessment of post-termination attitudes of former employees** may **help the broader community gain insights into the standing of the** organization as a good corporate citizen. Termination practices, and the handling of layoffs in particular, are two of many indicators of good corporate citizenship (see discussion in Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999), and former employee attitude toward the company is an important, albeit partial, measure of the organization's performance as a socially responsible employer. Post-termination attitudes may provide a gauge of the success of labor practices that might encourage social investors who are concerned about the ethical behavior of organizations and choose to invest in organizations that have socially responsible business practices (see discussion in McMahon, 1999). Shareholder advocacy of socially responsible business behavior is on the increase and many socially

responsible portfolios are screened for responsible labor practices (Social Investment Forum, 1999).

Whether organizations can **affect** post-termination outlooks through strengthening commitment during employment and ensuring fair and interpersonally sensitive termination practices is the focus of the present study. While it appears logical that this would be the case, there is no empirical support for this assertion in the literature. Thus, the goal of this study is to contribute to the literature on the work attitudes of former employees. In particular, this study seeks to make a new contribution by examining the palatability **to the employee** of the reason for leaving **the organization** and **the employee's** ownership of the decision to leave. Additionally, this study will contribute to the growing literature on procedural justice by examining a population that has attracted very little research attention: a sample of those who have left their employer for a range of reasons.

The study is based on a two-wave longitudinal panel that examines the extent to which organizational commitment while employed is related to two subsequent post-termination outcomes: affective commitment to the organization and willingness to endorse the organization. We will also examine whether the outcomes are influenced by the reason for termination, the degree of termination decision ownership, and employees' sense of procedural justice. **DROP THESE NEXT TWO SENTENCES:** Interaction effects will also be tested. Insight in these areas may enable organizations to be more effective in maintaining positive affect toward the organization among former employees, and subsequently support positive behavior toward the organization.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

In the following sections, we examine the literature on commitment, endorsement of the organization, procedural justice and termination reasons and decision ownership. In particular, we examine factors affecting organizational commitment while employed, and how they relate to post-termination organizational commitment and endorsement. The literature is used to build the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.

Organizational Commitment

Pre-termination organizational commitment. Social exchange theory posits that employees are willing to exchange loyalty for support in their interactions with employers (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Hutchison, 1997). Therefore, how individuals are treated while they are employed affects their attitude and commitment toward their employer. The employee/employer reciprocal exchange relationship is built on the exchange of good treatment for positive attitude. Consequently, the employer has the power to influence that relationship through its behavior. Organizational commitment covers a range of attitudinal and behavioral responses about the organization and is sometimes described simply as loyalty. It is helpful to regard commitment as multi-dimensional and note the two types of commitment that dominate recent literature in this area: affective or attitudinal commitment (emotional attachment to the organization), and continuance commitment (typically behavioral; involves commitment to remaining with the organization) (Zeffane, 1994).

Commitment to the organization while employed is, in part, a function of the treatment that individuals receive from their employer. Organizational commitment is very strongly associated with perceived organizational support (Hutchison, Valentino & Kirkner, 1998) and

job satisfaction and job scope (Fullagar & Barling, 1991; Cohen, 1999; Fukami & Larson, 1984), factors the organization can also control. Employees who perceive that the organization is responsible for facilitating a positive experience tend to reciprocate with high affective commitment (Cohen, 1999). Thus, the actions of the organization can influence employee feelings of commitment while employed. However, we do not know whether this feeling can be maintained beyond termination.

Post-termination organizational commitment and endorsement. While measurement of organizational commitment of current employees has been motivated by its relationship to work outcomes (Cohen, 1999), post-termination measurement is also useful for the reasons outlined earlier. We posit that measurement of commitment after termination provides a gauge of the positive, neutral or negative affect toward the terminating organization and as such, provides information useful in evaluating the actions of the company before and during termination.

Using exchange theory, there is no reason for organizational commitment to drop significantly unless the organization has behaved in a fashion that is not acceptable to the employee. While commitment may slide slowly over time as the relationship to the former employer becomes more distant, we speculate that commitment does not simply vanish at the end of the employment contract. While the popular media report that there is no longer a place for loyalty in the American workplace, this has not yet been supported through thorough empirical research. As commitment appears to be a fairly stable construct over time (Lawson & Angle, 1998; Fullagar & Barling, 1991) we expect that organizational commitment while employed will be positively related to affective commitment after termination.

Individual willingness to endorse the organization is another reflection of commitment to the company, and could be considered an aspect of continuance commitment. As endorsement

has been included in some measures of organizational commitment, we expect that organizational commitment will predict willingness to endorse the organization after termination.

[italicize hypotheses; they are important; make them stand out]

Hypothesis 1: organizational commitment at Time 1 will be positively associated with affective organizational commitment and organizational endorsement at Time 2(post-termination).

Treatment when Leaving the Organization

While treatment during employment has a significant impact on commitment, we believe **that** treatment during termination may also play a major role. We expect that organizational commitment while employed will be related to organizational commitment after leaving the organization unless some **negative event or series of events**, such as a poor termination experience, were to damage that relationship. In this study we examine certain aspects **[of what?]** that could affect commitment, including: (a) the individual's perception of procedural justice, (b) **the individual's** reason for leaving the organization and (c) **the individual's** ownership of the decision to leave.

Procedural justice. Procedural justice aspects of the layoff process include the organization providing valid reasons for layoffs, treating terminated employees decently, having a fair selection procedure for determining those to be laid off, and having effective communication about the layoffs (see discussion in Greenberg, 1990). Employees are more likely to report trust (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996) and commitment (Greenberg, Anderson-Connolly & Greenberg, 2000) toward the organization where there have been fair procedures. A sense of low procedural justice is associated with low loyalty to the organization (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). People respond favorably to fair procedures (Brockner, Wiesenfeld & Martin,

1995) and those who perceive a decision to be handled fairly and well are less inclined to sue (Bies & Tyler, 1993), and are more willing to endorse the organization (Konovsky & Folger, 1991). Clear explanation of procedures in layoff situations is also associated with a perception of the layoff process as fair and a willingness to endorse the organization (Wanberg, Bunce & Gavin, 1999). While these findings have not been empirically supported with a sample that includes voluntary and involuntary leavers, we expect that perceived procedural justice will be associated with affective commitment and willingness to endorse the organization.

Hypothesis 2: the individual's sense of procedural justice concerning terminations will be positively associated with affective commitment to the organization and willingness to endorse the organization.

Reason for termination. Individuals leave organizations for a range of reasons, with some reasons being more palatable to them than others. We posit that the palatability of the reason for leaving is a function of the sense of psychological contract violation inherent in the termination and the favorableness of the outcome. Palatability of the reason for termination is expected to have a direct effect on affective commitment and organizational endorsement.

Different reasons for employment termination can be expected to produce varying degrees of the sense of psychological contract violation. A psychological work contract describes the informal exchange relationship between the employee and the employer that is made up of perceived obligations (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). Violation occurs when this implicit contract between the employer and employee is broken, resulting in a change in behavior or attitude. This could be a result of the organization knowingly renegeing on a promise it made, or the employee perceiving a violation even when the organization believes that it has met the terms of the agreement (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). With demotion, a contract

violation similar to that in termination, some employees view the organization as no longer deserving of the emotional attachment they had previously given it (More, 1962). Similarly, in the case of termination, the violation may destroy the sense of obligation to the employer and create a possible change in loyalty to the organization (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994).

Grunberg, Anderson-Connolly and Greenberg (2000) found that contact with the layoff of others did not have a significant effect on commitment, and speculate that the expectation of layoffs in the modern economy results in this not being as significant a normative violation as in the past. We expect, however, that the experience of others is far less powerful than one's own and therefore expect that personal layoff will be experienced as a significant violation, with a resultant drop in commitment, regardless of changing cultural norms. Termination against one's wishes, such as being fired or laid off, we believe, is viewed by the individual as a significant psychological contract violation. We expect a lesser sense of violation for those encouraged to retire early, or for those leaving voluntarily for another job because the organization had not met the employee's needs. No sense of violation is expected to be experienced by an individual who has simply reached planned retirement age and retired.

Similarly, outcome favorableness varies across reasons for termination. It would typically be regarded as highly undesirable to be laid off or fired, while normal retirement is generally regarded as a very desirable outcome. We posit that reasons for termination that involve low psychological contract violation and high outcome favorability will be regarded as more palatable, and, as such, will be associated with affective commitment and organizational endorsement.

Hypothesis 3: the palatability of the reason for termination will be positively associated with affective commitment to the organization and willingness to endorse the organization.

Termination decision ownership. Because the work relationship is typically a major investment of one's time, determines one's standard of living, and provides social interaction and status in a work-oriented culture, having ownership of the decision to leave could have important and substantial effects on post-termination attitudes **about the organization**. "Ownership" of the employment termination decision can be viewed as falling anywhere on the continuum from entirely in the hands of the individual, to entirely in the hands of management. Apart from the reality of who has "true" control over the decision, individuals have a choice about how they describe their termination to themselves and others. We posit that those terminated unwillingly will react with face-saving defense mechanisms that may, in fact, be a healthy coping technique (Lazarus, 1993). One especially important defense mechanism may be to frame the decision to leave as one's own, even when one had little choice but to go along with the employer's plan. Such an attribution may allow the individual to feel that they have control over their environment (Bennett, Martin, Bies, and Brockner, 1995). While participative decision-making at work has been found to be positively associated with affective commitment (Hutchison, 1997) there is no research published specifically on the termination decision; however, the literature in related areas supports our hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: individuals who have a sense of personal termination decision ownership will be more likely to have affective commitment to the organization and be more willing to endorse the organization.

[drop this sentence/ paragraph...no need to talk about interactions until actually do them....as it is, it just hangs there] We also plan to explore interaction effects between

organizational commitment and each of the three treatment variables on organizational endorsement and affective commitment among those who have left the organization.

Methods

Participants

[this seems pretty skimpy to me. why not simply cut and paste description of the study from one of our published papers?] All participants had been employed in a large manufacturing organization on the West Coast of the United States in 1997 when the study began. A survey was mailed to a random sample of 3,700 employees as part of a larger project. The resulting responses provided a sample size of 2279 and a response rate of 62%. The respondents were demographically representative of the organization as a whole (for further detail see Grunberg, Anderson-Connolly, & Greenberg, 2000). **A second survey was sent to these xxx respondents from the first survey approximately two-and-a-half years after the first. [you have said nothing so far to tell the reader that there were two surveys...T1 and T2...of the same individuals...]** Of the first wave respondents, 310 individuals had left the company by October 1999, **the date of our second survey**. This group is the target population of this study. Of those who comprised this group, 3 were deceased, and survey packets were mailed to the remaining 307 former employees, for whom mailing addresses had been provided by the company. Mail was returned undelivered for 5 individuals, and 171 completed surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 57% of the targeted 302 former employees.

Comparison of the 171 respondents and the sampling frame of 307 on company-identified reason for leaving and occupational category found the sample to be representative of the targeted group. Respondents ranged in age from 26 to 77 years, the average being 51 years.

Respondents were predominantly male (71%), married (71%), and well-educated (49% had a bachelor's degree or higher qualification). Tenure at the company ranged from 4 to 41 years with an average length of service of 18 years. At the time of the survey, it had been an average of 15 months since respondents had left the company.

Instruments and Procedures

Each survey packet included a cover letter that reminded the individual that he/she had participated in the first stage of the study and asked them to participate again. The letter explained the purpose of the study and outlined the process by which they had been selected to participate. The letter also assured the individual of confidentiality. Also enclosed were a consent form, survey form, postage paid reply envelope, and a \$1 bill as a token of appreciation for completing the survey. The survey mailing was followed two weeks later with a reminder postcard to all those from whom completed surveys had not yet been received.

Surveys were identified by unique code numbers to facilitate tracking and to allow matching to the data set from the original study. Data provided by the company, including reason for termination and occupational group, were merged with this survey data along with data from the original study, to create the working data file for this project. The survey was an eight-page questionnaire with 38 items on six pages. Only a small number of these items were used in this study. The measures included in this study are described below.

Variables

Organizational commitment (Time 1). **[for each of the variable descriptions, I would say a bit about the source of the measure, much as we have done in previous work....something like, “this variable is an adaptation of the measure from.....”then give citation, or “this measure is original to this study, etc.....]**The organizational commitment

scale assessed the degree of loyalty toward the company while employed, and included affective commitment or emotional attachment and willingness to stay with the company. Organizational commitment was measured on a scale made up of three items, with a possible range of 3 – 15 and Cronbach's alpha of .76. The items were "I am proud to work for [the company]", "I would turn down another job with more pay in order to stay with [the company]", and "I feel very little loyalty to [the company]" (reverse coded). Each item had five response options ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.

Affective commitment (Time 2). The affective commitment scale assessed the extent of the emotional attachment to the organization after leaving and was measured on a scale made up of two items. The possible range was 2 – 10 and the Cronbach's alpha was .69. The items were "I am proud to have worked for [the company]" and "I feel little loyalty to [the company]" (reverse coded). Each item had five response options on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.

Organizational endorsement (Time 2). Organizational endorsement was assessed with one item evaluating the willingness to endorse the organization after leaving: "I would recommend [the company] as a place to work." Response options on a Likert-type scale ranged from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.

Procedural justice (Time 2). Procedural justice assessed the degree to which the individual perceived layoff procedures as fair. This included assessment of the company's treatment of those who were let go, fairness of selection procedures, the validity of the reasons given for the layoffs and how well employees were kept informed during the layoffs. Procedural justice was measured on a scale comprised of four items, with each item having four Likert-type responses specific to the question. **[I would list all of the questions here or in appendix]** For

example, “How fair was the procedure that [the company] used to select those who were to be let go?” had response options ranging from 1 not fair at all to 4 very fair. The scale had a possible range of 4 – 16 and a Cronbach’s alpha of .80.

Reason for leaving (Time 2). As the reasons for termination provided by the company are not always the same as reasons given by the individuals when they self-identify their cause for termination, both groups of reasons were examined vis-à-vis the dependent variables. There were a total of 10 company-provided reasons for leaving in this sample (out of 17 possible company-identified reasons for leaving) with the company assigning only one reason per individual. The survey, however, provided 11 reasons for leaving that had been identified by researchers, and asked respondents to circle all termination reasons that applied to them. To determine the palatability of reasons for leaving, the company-identified and self-identified reasons for leaving were listed separately and 10 judges were asked to categorize the reasons for leaving into high, moderate and low palatability. The judges were asked to determine their rating considering primarily the sense of psychological contract violation, and, secondarily, the favorableness of the termination outcome. As some judges assigned certain items to two category ratings, palatability was later assigned a numerical value, on a scale of 1 to 5, with low palatability = 1, low/moderate = 2, moderate = 3, high/moderate = 4 and high = 5. For each reason, the highest and lowest score was dropped, and the mean calculated, resulting in a palatability value for each reason. Mean, standard deviation and range of ratings are shown in Table 1. Table 1 also lists the percent of respondents assigned to a termination category (company) or who checked a termination reason (self).

Some reasons were found by the judges to be clearly falling at a particular value (e.g., being fired was regarded as highly unpalatable across all judges). Others, however, were more

difficult to categorize, as judges felt that the reason could be palatable in some cases, and unpalatable in others. For example, company-identified personal circumstances had a mean rating of 3 with a standard deviation of 1.15. While it could be highly palatable to have the personal circumstance of being financially able to leave, it could also be highly unpalatable to have interpersonal problems with a supervisor or coworker, and to leave for that reason. As individuals were permitted to self-identify multiple reasons for leaving, their individual palatability score for self-identified reasons was the mean of the values of the reasons they had selected. The possible range of scores was 1 – 5.

Termination decision ownership. Termination decision ownership assessed the extent to which respondents believed the decision to leave was that of the company's management versus that of the individual. It was measured by one item, "To what extent was your leaving [the company] the result of your own personal decision or the decision of [the company's] management?" with response options ranging from 1 (completely the decision of the individual) to 5 (completely the decision of management). Responses were then re-coded 0 through 4, respectively.

Results

Reasons for Leaving

As shown in the first column of Table 1, frequencies of the company-identified reasons for leaving showed early retirement as the most common reason (38%) followed by layoff (33%) and leaving to accept another position (17%). Self-identified reasons showed early retirement as the most frequent (41%), followed by Mutually Agreed Voluntary Layoff (24%) and quitting to take another job (22%). While there were 11 possible self-identified reasons for leaving, and the opportunity to select multiple reasons, 67% of the respondents chose only one reason.

Distribution of frequency of palatability scores for company- and self-identified reasons differed, with company reasons showing more individuals with very low and very high palatability scores ($SD = 1.4$) compared with self-identified reasons, where more individuals fell into the moderate palatability range ($SD = .79$). The mean palatability for company-identified reasons (2.71) was lower than the mean palatability for self-identified reasons (3.21). **[hint at what this might mean/portend]**

Scale Means and Intercorrelations

Means, standard deviations, ranges and Cronbach's alphas for all scales are shown in Table 2. Intercorrelations for items and scales used in the study can also be found in Table 2. Over 80% of the respondents indicated that the decision to leave was completely theirs rather than that of the company's management. Those who regarded the decision to leave as their own were more likely to have experienced more palatable reasons for termination ($-.39, p < .01$ for company-identified and $-.70, p < .01$ for self-identified reasons.) **[this sentence hangs here; seems unrelated to what precedes it in the paragraph] Other scales were fairly normally distributed.**

The palatability of the company-identified and self-identified reasons for leaving did not behave similarly in relation to all variables, although they were both associated with income, and moderately correlated with each other ($.52, p < .01$). For example, palatability of the company-identified reason was negatively associated with Time 1 organizational commitment ($-.21, p < .01$) and showed no significant relationship with procedural justice. On the other hand, palatability of the self-identified reason for leaving showed no significant relationship with Time 1 organizational commitment, yet showed a significant positive correlation with procedural justice ($.27, p < .01$). **[say what this might mean....why might the reader be interested?]**

OLS Regression Results

Eight multiple regression analyses were conducted for the primary outcome measures of interest, four for affective commitment, and four for organizational endorsement. In **Equation 1** [it is customary to talk of equations, not models...make changes throughout] Model 1, demographic variables (age, tenure, income, education and gender) were entered first as controls as they **have** been shown in the literature to have significant relationships with the **dependent** variables of interest here, **organizational commitment and endorsement of the organization**. They were followed in Model 2 by prior organizational commitment, which had been shown by stepwise regression as a more powerful predictor than any of the Time 2 variables of procedural justice, palatability of company and self-identified reasons for leaving, and decision ownership. In order to examine the unique variation explained in each dependent variable, the four independent variables of interest at Time 2 (i.e. procedural justice, palatability of company and self-identified reasons for leaving and decision ownership) were added to the equation separately in the third models. (In subsequent analyses, these were entered as a block; see below.) In Model 4 moderator effects were examined by adding the interaction term created with Time 1 commitment and the respective Time 2 variable that had been entered in Model 3.

Table 3 shows the results for the dependent variable affective commitment. Each independent variable accounted for variance beyond the demographic controls and Time 1 commitment. Procedural justice accounted for 5% of variance ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$), decision ownership accounted for 4% ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .01$), and company-identified reasons for leaving predicted 2% ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$) while self-identified reasons predicted 5% of the variance ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). Interaction terms were nonsignificant. Table 4 displays the regression findings for organizational endorsement. Procedural justice accounted for an additional 9% of

endorsement ($\beta = .34, p < .001$) beyond demographic variables and Time 1 commitment, decision ownership predicted an 4% ($\beta = -.17, p < .05$), company-identified reasons predicted 5% ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) as did the self-identified reasons ($\beta = .24, p < .01$). All interaction effects were nonsignificant. Thus, Hypotheses 1 through 4 **which suggested that[repeat some of the meat of the hypotheses so reader doesn't have to page back to them]** (direct effects) were supported for both affective commitment and organizational endorsement outcomes, while moderator effects were not supported.

We also regressed organizational commitment and endorsement of the organization on all independent variables using stepwise procedures, after first entering demographic variables (**equation 2, table....**). For affective commitment, these analyses show that the variables with predictive power are Time 1 **organizational** commitment ($\beta = .58, p < .001$), **which explains** 30% of the outcome variance above demographic controls, procedural justice ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), **which explains** an additional 5%, and self-identified reasons for leaving ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), **which explains** 1%. As a group, these variables, **in combination with** demographic controls, accounted for 47% of the variance of affective commitment. Company-identified reasons **for termination** and **individual's sense of decision ownership** were nonsignificant. For the organizational endorsement dependent variable, Time 1 commitment again proved to be the most powerful predictor ($\beta = .52, p < .001$), explaining 23% of variance above demographic variables, followed by procedural justice ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), which explained 10% and company-identified reasons ($\beta = .16, p < .05$), which accounted for 1%. The demographic controls and this group of variables explained a total of 41% of variance in organizational endorsement while self-identified reasons and decision ownership were nonsignificant.

Discussion

The analyses reported here support the hypotheses specified above. Post-termination organizational commitment is predicted by organizational commitment while employed, perception of procedural justice **in the termination process, the individual's sense of the palatability of the reason for leaving, and the individual's sense of ownership of the decision to leave.** However, moderator effects **including[repeat what they are here; the moderator effects you tested for]** were not found.¹

That prior organizational commitment is such a powerful predictor of post-termination affective commitment and organizational endorsement in a longitudinal study supports the view that commitment is an important **explanatory variable.** This is also supported by the sustainability of the sense of pride in having worked for the company.² **[say more...important finding]** Nevertheless, **[why “nevertheless”? how about “Additionally”]**we have shown that the sense of procedural justice **concerning the conduct of termination,** the palatability of the reason for leaving **the organization, and the individual's sense of decision ownership as strongly associated with** the post-termination organizational commitment scores. **This suggests that the actions** of the organization during termination can **enhance or diminish** long-term commitment **by former employees.**

The analyses also suggest that procedural justice is significantly related to both affective commitment and organizational endorsement. Perception among those who have left the organization that layoffs were done fairly ~~and well~~ was found to predict affective commitment and organizational endorsement after termination, extending previous research that **has found that** commitment while employed **is** associated with perception of fair procedures (Grunberg, Anderson-Connolly & Greenberg, 2000; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Social exchange theory

may explain the relationship between perceived procedural justice and commitment after termination. Individuals who feel confident that layoffs have been handled fairly view the organization as deserving of the commitment they offer, and there is no reason to reduce commitment, unless the organization acts in a fashion that creates an inequity in that exchange. Thus, those who have a positive perception of procedural justice continue to reciprocate in the exchange relationship by feeling commitment to the organization despite having become detached from it.

Results of the experimental **[I'm not sure that "experimental" is the correct word for describing how this measure was created]** palatability scales were valuable, with palatability of reason for leaving being a significant predictor of post-termination commitment and endorsement. The results support the notion that there is a greater sense of psychological contract violation associated with some reasons for leaving than for others. There appears to be a greater sense of violation in involuntary terminations, with being fired or experiencing an involuntary layoff as the most severe. The different variables for self- and company-identified reasons for leaving permitted some examination of the difference between the two palatability scales. The difference in palatability score distribution may be accounted for by the company having grouped employees who were laid off into a general layoff category. This category included both involuntary and mutually negotiated layoffs, while the self-identified options allowed individuals to indicate the Mutually Agreed Voluntary Layoff option, which the judges deemed to be more palatable than an involuntary layoff. Individuals may also have cognitively re-framed their reason for leaving as one that is more socially acceptable or palatable. The self-identified reasons variable appears to have been a more accurate measure of the palatability of individual reasons for leaving as it allowed multiple reasons for leaving to be recorded, and as

such, provided a palatability value that took all of their reasons into account. Self-identified reasons also accounted for slightly more variance in affective commitment (5%) than did the company-identified reasons (2%). However, there was no difference between the amounts of explained variance for organizational endorsement (5% in both cases). To gain an accurate sense of the violation in and palatability of the departure, it is important to recognize the multifaceted nature of quitting and understand that there may be numerous reasons that have combined to result in the decision to leave.

Decision ownership also proved to be a useful measure in predicting both outcome variables[say **what they are again...memories of readers are short**]. The majority of individuals (81%) did express that they had complete ownership of the decision to leave, which is interesting in a sample where many members of the group had been “pushed” toward leaving. According to company records, 2% had been fired, 33% had been laid off and 38% took early retirement. We posit that how individuals cognitively appraise the termination will affect their reaction to it. According to the Lazarus theory of stress, we “alter our circumstances, or how they are interpreted, to make them appear more favorable –an effort called coping” (Lazarus, 1993, p. 8). It is apparent that decision ownership must be preferable for most people, particularly when there is a favorable outcome. Nonetheless, it seems that they are willing to take responsibility for their decision to leave, even when they are encouraged to leave. Cognitive dissonance theory is also useful in explaining this behavior. An individual experiencing the dissonance of lack of control in the termination decision might change his “knowledge” of the situation, to reduce the dissonance (Festinger, 1957, p. 6).

Considering that individuals take ownership of the decision to leave, it is not surprising that ownership predicts commitment outcomes. When individuals takes responsibility for the

decision to leave, they consequently absolve the company of responsibility for the decision. As mentioned earlier, commitment to the company is earned by the company in an exchange relationship (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Hutchison, 1997). Those who recognize that they chose to leave cannot place blame for their leaving on the employer, and it would therefore be unreasonable to drastically reduce their commitment to the organization as a result of that choice. In contrast, those who view the decision to leave as completely that of management might recognize the inconsistency of feeling committed to an employer that had forced them to leave, and are likely to respond with a subsequent sharp reduction in commitment to the organization.

Affective commitment and endorsement, although having similar antecedents, are not affected in quite the same way by the independent variables. For example, Time 1 organizational commitment (an antecedent) accounted for slightly more variance in affective commitment than in organizational endorsement. However, there is greater construct correspondence between organizational commitment and affective commitment (both attitudinal) than between organizational commitment (attitudinal) and organizational endorsement (behavioral). Considering the partial correspondence between the latter pair of variables, it is not surprising that they do not yield as high a relationship (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Another aspect that may effect this difference is that the intention to act, and the subsequent behavior are influenced by subjective norms (Ajzen & Madden, 1986); an individual may be less inclined to actually speak up and recommend their former employer if they perceive any social pressure to criticize the company.

The response to this survey is in itself surprising. Considering that these people had left their employer on average 15 months earlier and were paid only one dollar **for their**

participation, it is interesting that they were inclined to make the effort to respond to a survey asking many questions about their relationship to their former employer. Such would seem to suggest a need for personal closure of some kind around the issue of termination. Responding to a survey that expressed an interest in their experience may have provided an avenue to be heard. This idea is further supported by the fact that 96% of the individuals surveyed responded to at least one of three open-ended questions in the survey.

[I would turn this short section into a note]Limitations

Beyond the usual problems associated with self-report data, single-item measures and experimental scales, we point out that there was some discrepancy between self-identified and company-identified reasons for leaving the company. However, both sources provided useful information from differing perspectives. For example, 3% more self-identified early retirement as a reason for leaving (41%) compared to the company-identified frequency of that reason (38%). Similarly, the company categorized 2% as taking early retirement, while 8% of the group self-identified that reason for leaving. While the company viewed 17% as leaving for another job, 22% self-identified the same reason for leaving. While these are not very large differences, it is useful to have both sources considering that people do appear to reframe their experiences, and it is reasonable to expect differences in this information. For palatability of reasons for leaving, it is difficult to determine with complete accuracy for every individual which reasons for termination are more or less favorable, as there may be a feeling of contentment in being relieved of burdensome tasks (More, 1962). In future research it may be useful to have participants themselves rate palatability.

Implications

This study expands the domain of work termination psychology and makes a new contribution to the literature by examining palatability of reasons for leaving and ownership of the decision to leave, bringing to the surface factors of work psychology that deserves further attention. In contrast to other research, this study has examined a broad sample that includes individuals who have left the organization both voluntarily and involuntarily, expanding the literature on post-termination attitude. Also, by examining perception of procedural justice in a large sample of actual former employees who have left for a range of reasons, this work contributes to the literature on organizational justice. From the relatively high response rate and strength and number of open-ended responses obtained, it is apparent that individuals have clear attitudes toward their former employer after termination.

The findings of the present study have implications for human resource management. Organizational commitment while employed is clearly a very powerful predictor of post-termination attitude toward the company. This is an additional reason **for companies** to place **greater** emphasis on providing a positive work environment that supports commitment while employed. Such an environment may result in a situation where former employees feel positively toward the organization, and are more likely to view the organization as a good corporate citizen and a socially responsible employer. As such, former employees can endorse the organization, either as an investment or as an employer. In a tight labor market, the endorsement of the organization by former employees may assist with recruiting. Additionally, those who feel positively toward the organization are less likely to sue or engage in violence

against the organization (Bennett, Martin, Bies, & Brockner, 1995; Bies & Tyler, 1993; Wanberg, Bunce & Gavin, 1999).

It is clear that the termination process affects long-term commitment, and employers will need to be sensitive and fair in handling terminations to maintain commitment among former employees. Procedures that provide ample opportunity for individual recourse, are clearly communicated, and are supported by valid reasons, will encourage long-term commitment to the company. As greater decision ownership is associated with commitment (as well as perceptions of procedural justice), it may serve the employer and the individual to create termination arrangements that allow the employee as much participation in the decision as possible. Decision ownership persists as a powerful predictor even among those who are leaving for unpalatable reasons, giving the organization some control over long-term views toward the company. Supporting “voluntary” terminations appears to facilitate a sense of decision ownership, even when the individuals have little choice but to comply.

Considering the strength of feeling toward the organization in former employees, it may be valuable, for both the company and the former employee, to have an alumnus association that provides social and business contact between current and former employees for those who remain committed to the company. Additionally, there may be retired individuals who would be valuable as coaches, mentors or volunteers for the organization.

In conclusion, little research work has explored the attitudes of those who have left their employment, particularly those who have left for a range of reasons. This work has shown that the process of leaving has a significant impact on the attitude of individuals after termination, even though prior commitment in itself is a powerful predictor. How organizations treat individuals, both during the time that they are employed, and in the process of leaving, affects

their attitude toward the company. Further research in this area could result in a better understanding of the factors that shape termination and post-termination attitudes and might help organizations engage in interpersonally sensitive termination practices. In minimizing the negative effects of termination on attitude, we may see positive post-termination behavior that the company cares about.

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Footnotes

¹Interaction effects between independent variables were not found to be significant in this study, and while it is possible that they simply do not exist, it may be that the direct effects were simply overpowering. As interaction effects have been found in related work (Brockner, et al., 1994; Wanberg, Bunce, & Gavin, 1999) future research should continue to explore interaction effects.

²A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the means of the questions “I am proud to work for [the company]” (Time 1) and “I am proud to have worked for [the company]” (Time 2). Although the wording of the items was not identical, they were significantly correlated (.60, $p < .001$), with a slight yet not statistically significant increase in the mean score from Time 1 (3.7) to Time 2 (3.8).