

# THE MODERATING ROLE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING IN THE EMBEDDEDNESS-TURNOVER INTENTION RELATIONSHIP

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**Abstract** *Organizational embeddedness has been considered a predictor of a number of desirable work outcomes. Little work has however explored whether embedded employees would still respond positively in unfavourable work conditions. This gap is addressed in the current study. More specifically, this study replicates existing embeddedness research by proposing that organizational embeddedness can negatively predict voluntary turnover intention. However, it goes on to suggest that unfavourable work conditions consistent with workplace bullying moderates the embeddedness-turnover intention relationship, such that when bullying is higher, the negative relationship between embeddedness and turnover intentions becomes weaker.*

*Employee data was collected from 689 employees across three Caribbean countries to test these propositions. The findings provided support for the propositions that embeddedness negatively predicted turnover intention and that workplace bullying moderated the embeddedness-turnover intention relationship. Implications, limitations and future research directions offered by these findings are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Organizational Embeddedness, Turnover Intentions, Unfavourable Work Conditions, Workplace Bullying, Caribbean*

## INTRODUCTION

Organizational embeddedness is often described as the on-the-job linkages/relationships and the congruence or fit between employees and the organizational values/goals that makes it a costly sacrifice if they were to exit their job (Mitchell et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2004; Crossley et al., 2007; Allen, 2006;). This web of connections can tie an employee to his/her organization of employment. It is one of the two dimensions of the job embeddedness construct; community embeddedness is the second component which describes the web of off-the-job links, fit and sacrifices. Since its introduction in 2001, organizational embeddedness has been associated with a number of desirable organizational and employee outcomes including organizational citizenship behaviours, employee engagement and performance (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Lee et al., 2004). Indeed, embeddedness has been considered a boon by most organisations given its positive impact on employee attitudes, and performance.

One of the strongest, consistent findings within embeddedness research is that when employees are embedded, they are less likely to leave their organization of employment. Indeed,

voluntary turnover remains one of the most costly issues facing organizations (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000; Sagie et al., 2002). Hinkin and Tracey (2000) estimate that voluntary turnover can constitute up to 5% of a company's operating budget, while Sagie et al. (2002) argue that turnover can cost anywhere upward and around 17% of a company's annual pre-tax income. Traditional turnover models argue that an employee's job satisfaction, their organizational commitment and the availability of attractive job alternatives on the labour market should explain voluntary turnover. Such models have been found to be weak, explaining as little as 4-5% of the variance in voluntary turnover (Yang et al., 2011). In comparison, it has been suggested that embeddedness provides a more compelling explanation of voluntary turnover and its intentions by understanding the links, fit and sacrifices that can keep an employee in his or her organization of employment even if they may not be satisfied, low on commitment or even if there may be available attractive job alternatives (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006).

Notably however, employees operate within an organizational environment characterized by various work conditions which may impact their embeddedness and voluntary turnover

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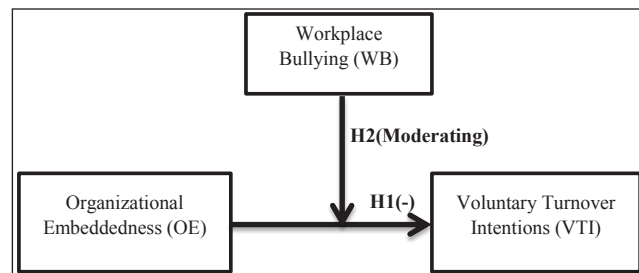
intentions. Indeed, the fast-paced environment within which organizations operate today is known for the preponderance of unfavourable work conditions (Greene et al., 2018). Limited research has explored the potential negative factors which may indirectly impact on the embeddedness-turnover relationship (Allen et al., 2016; Greene et al., 2018). The predominance of workplace bullying within today's organizational environment may represent such a negative factor. Workplace bullying is a serious psychosocial occupational hazard that affects around 15% of employees at any point in time (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2011). It occurs when a worker, or group of workers, is targeted by negative or aggressive behaviour repeatedly and regularly over a period of time (Einarsen et al., 2003, 2011). While embedded employees may be less likely to leave their organization, this relationship can be adversely affected if such employees are victims of workplace bullying. This study explores the notion that employee embeddedness may not always have a favourable influence on voluntary turnover intentions, by proposing that workplace bullying can moderate this relationship. This research is therefore built upon addressing two objectives:

- 1) To validate the negative relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions.
- 2) To assess the impact of workplace bullying on the organizational embeddedness-turnover intention relationship to determine whether such work conditions can have adverse effects.

Indeed, the primary contribution of this paper is challenging the notion that embeddedness is always associated with positive organizational outcomes by asserting that when employees are victims of workplace bullying the negative relationship between embeddedness and voluntary turnover can be weakened. In this way, the impact of embeddedness can be adversely affected. At the same time, the relationship between organizational embeddedness and turnover intentions is tested as a replication (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2001) of existing research and is conducted in the context of developing Caribbean nations. Community embeddedness is not investigated in this study since employees do not relocate across communities in small Caribbean countries at any significant rate whether or not they change jobs and organisations (Central Statistical Office, 2010).

To address the research objectives, embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) are used to provide insight into how embeddedness can negatively predict voluntary turnover intentions and more importantly how workplace bullying can moderate this relationship by weakening the impact of embeddedness on turnover. These

relationships are summarized in the proposed research model shown in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1: Research Model**

Theoretically, investigating the potential conditions under which the power of organizational embeddedness as a negative predictor of turnover intentions can be adversely affected provides an alternative lens to the existing work which looks more at the positive outcomes of embeddedness. Practically, as employers strive to keep their talented employees, they must also address the negative work conditions within which employees operate to maximize the benefits of organizational embeddedness.

## THEORY & HYPOTHESES

### Organizational Embeddedness and Voluntary Turnover Intentions

Job embeddedness theory describes the “totality” or “web” of organizational (work) and community (non-work) components that influence an employee's choice and attitudes to remain in an organization (Bergiel et al., 2009). These work and non-work components can be further divided into three dimensions— links, fit, and sacrifice. Organizational embeddedness is derived from job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) and represents the work or organizational component of job embeddedness. Organizational links describe the connections, relationships and networks employees develop within the organization. Fit describes the congruence between the goals and values of the employee and organization and organizational sacrifice describes the material and psychological benefits an employee may have to forfeit when leaving the organization. Together these organizational links, fit and sacrifice form the web of connections that embed or tie employees to their organization of employment.

The underlying logic of embeddedness theory is that if employees intend to stay with a particular organization, that their links within the organization should be strong, that their fit with the organizational values should be high, and it may become costly for them to actually leave given that they should be rooted within their organization. Mitchell

et al. (2001) was the first study which found empirical support that organizational embeddedness was associated with lower turnover intentions. Crossley et al. (2007) in their study also supported these findings of turnover intentions as a consequence of embeddedness. Thereafter, a plethora of other studies (e.g. Lee et al., 2004; Bambacas & Kulik, 2013) consistently supported the assertion that organizational embeddedness appeared to be a consistent, negative predictor of turnover intentions especially when relocation was not an issue of concern for employees. Singh (2016; 2017) also provided recent support for organizational embeddedness as a negative predictor of voluntary turnover intentions within the Caribbean context. As a replication of such previous works, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

***Hypothesis 1:** There is negative relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions.*

### **Workplace Bullying as a Moderator in the Relationship between Organizational Embeddedness and Voluntary Turnover Intentions**

Employees who are deeply embedded in their organizations are less likely to voluntarily leave, but this relationship can be adversely affected by unfavourable work conditions. An organization where workplace bullying is prevalent may be consistent with unfavourable work conditions (Greene et al., 2018). Workplace bullying involves psychological or physical acts that are directly or indirectly aimed at the victims or targets. Psychological acts can include humiliating and threatening employees and physical acts can include violence. Workplace bullying includes repeated and systematic acts, which distinguishes bullying from other forms of workplace mistreatment, such as harassment and incivility. The perpetrator of bullying can be any organizational member (co-workers and supervisors). During the bullying process, the target ends up in an inferior position and is systematically exposed to negative acts (Einarsen et al., 2003, 2011).

Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) suggests that individuals have behavioural freedom they believe they can engage in and events that threaten or lead to loss of behavioural freedom generate a motivational state (reactance) aimed at gaining control of the situation. Embedded employees who are also victims of workplace bullying, when exposed to negative psychological and/or physical acts can be affected negatively in terms of their intentions to stay within such

an environment since bullying can indeed threaten the behavioural freedom of employees. Indeed, bullying acts forces the victim into an inferior position. The reactions of embedded victims of bullying can affect their turnover intentions as they strive to regain some control within that inferior position under such unfavourable work conditions.

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2001) further suggests that employees also strive to protect and gain resources. Resources can include personal characteristics, energies, objects, and conditions that are valued in their own right, or which help employees obtain other valued resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Workplace bullying however can lead to an erosion of energy resources as victims seek to cope with or gain some control over the situation. Einarsen et al. (2011) note further that workplace bullying has adverse effects on workers because efforts to combat it drain their energy reserves and eventually their personal and environmental resources. As this occurs, the embeddedness ties that keep employees in their organization can be weakened.

Therefore, employees who are tied to their organization through embedding links, fit and sacrifice develop a “stuckness inertia” (Mitchell et al., 2001) and react to adverse work conditions characterized by workplace bullying (Greene et al., 2018) by weakening their intentions to stay in such a work environment. On the basis of this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

***Hypothesis 2:** Workplace bullying moderates the relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions, such that when workplace bullying is present, the negative relationship between embeddedness and turnover intentions is weaker.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study Participants**

The target population included employees working within the services sector of three Caribbean countries; Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and Jamaica. The services sector was chosen because it is the largest employer sector across these countries. A convenience sampling approach was used to select participants from this sector. Key contacts were used to disseminate and collect the survey questionnaire. After accounting for missing data, outliers, and invalid responses, the sample size consisted of 689 employees working in key aspects of the services sector: education ( $N=101$ ), tourism/hospitality ( $N=158$ ), financial services ( $N=175$ ), protective services ( $N=120$ ), retail/distribution ( $N=135$ ). The ages of

the study participants ranged from 18 to 60 (mean age = 28.5 years,  $SD = 2.7$ ). 356 participants were from Trinidad and Tobago, 201 were from Barbados and 132 from Jamaica. The demographic make-up of this final sample was 62% of African descent, 20% of East-Indian descent and 18% being some other ethnic group. 301 employees were males and 388 were females.

## Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all of the variables were measured using five-point Likert scales, with anchors ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items in each scale were summed and averaged to create an overall variable score. Items were coded such that higher values represent higher levels of the constructs. Each scale demonstrated internal consistency based on Cronbach's alpha values.

## Organizational Embeddedness

Organizational embeddedness was measured using 6 items from Clinton, Knight and Guest's (2012) global conceptualization to provide a balanced operationalization of organizational embeddedness. Six items of this scale were used, with a reliability of  $\alpha = 0.90$ . Sample items include: "Overall, I have strong ties with people throughout the organization", "Overall, I fit very well in the organization", and "There would be many things about organizational life that I would be sad to lose if I left."

## Voluntary Turnover Intentions

Turnover intention was measured using a 3-item scale developed by Hom, Griffeth and Sellaro (1984), which was modified by Mitchell et al. (2001) in their study. The items used included ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ): "I intend to leave the organization in the next 12 months", "I feel strongly about leaving the organization within the next 12 months", and "It is likely that I will leave the organization in the next 12 months."

## Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is typically measured by asking about employees' exposure to specific negative acts known as the behavioural experience method (Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2011). This approach is deemed as the most objective measure of workplace bullying and hence it is used in this research study. More specifically, the revised version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire was used (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). The items ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) used included statements such as: "Having your opinions ignored" and "Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger." Participants were

asked to respond to such statements on a 5-point frequency scale with the following options: 1 = Very rarely/never, 2 = Rarely/once every few months, 3 = Sometimes/2-3 times a month, 4 = Often/2-3 times a week and 5 = Very often/always.

## Control Variables

In order to help eliminate potentially spurious relationships between the independent variables, dependent variable and moderator in this study (Hair et al., 2010), a number of variables were identified as control variables: Age (measured in years), level of education (1 = less than secondary school certificate; 2 = secondary school certificate for fifth form; 3 = secondary school certificate for sixth form; 4 = some college, no degree; 5 = certificate; 6 = diploma; 7 = associate degree; 8 = bachelor's degree; 9 = master's degree; 10 = doctorate; 11 = other) and job tenure (measured in years).

## Analysis Approach

All scales used to test the research variables were further validated using confirmatory factor analysis. The factor analyzed scales were each uni-dimensional with acceptably high factor loadings. The organizational embeddedness scale accounted for 61% extracted variance; the scale used to measure voluntary turnover intentions accounted for 67%; and the workplace bullying scale accounted for 60%. All standardized loading estimates ranged from 0.6 to 0.65.

In order to test the research hypotheses, hierarchical regression analysis was used. In all of the analyses the independent variables were centred to reduce the effects of non-essential ill conditioning by having the mean represent a meaningful zero point for better result interpretation (Cohen et al., 2003). The control variables were first entered in the regression equation in Step 1. In Step 2, the main effect relationship was evaluated between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions. In Step 3, an interaction term was created to test the moderation effect of workplace bullying. OE x WB were regressed against VTI, where OE represented organisational embeddedness, WB represented workplace bullying, and VTI represented voluntary turnover intentions. To assess the significance of each hypotheses, the beta ( $\beta$ ) coefficients, the F statistic, the R<sup>2</sup> values and the associated probability values were examined as advocated by Hair et al. (2010).

## RESULTS

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations between all of the main study variables and the controls.

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Inter-Correlations**

| Variable      | M    | SD  | 1      | 2      | 3     | 4      | 5     | 6    |
|---------------|------|-----|--------|--------|-------|--------|-------|------|
| 1. OE         | 3.8  | 0.9 | (--)   |        |       |        |       |      |
| 2. VTI        | 3.9  | 0.7 | -0.32* | (--)   |       |        |       |      |
| 3. WB         | 3.6  | 0.8 | -0.13  | 0.36** | (--)  |        |       |      |
| 4. Age        | 28.5 | 0.6 | 0.19*  | -0.11  | -0.07 | (--)   |       |      |
| 5. Education  | 6.9  | 0.9 | 0.09   | 0.18*  | 0.18* | 0.22*  | (--)  |      |
| 6. Job Tenure | 7.2  | 0.8 | 0.21*  | -0.19* | -0.14 | 0.34** | 0.23* | (--) |

The correlation results indicate that there were significant relationships between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions ( $r = -0.32$ ). There were no significant correlations between workplace bullying and organizational embeddedness ( $r = -0.13, ns$ ), but workplace bullying correlated significantly with voluntary turnover intentions ( $r = 0.36$ ). In terms of the controls, age did not significantly correlate with turnover intentions ( $r = -0.11, ns$ ) and level of education did not correlate with organizational embeddedness ( $r = 0.09, ns$ ), but it correlated significantly with workplace bullying ( $r = 0.18$ ) and turnover intentions

( $r = 0.18$ ). Job tenure correlated with turnover intentions ( $r = -0.19$ ) and organizational embeddedness ( $r = 0.21$ ), but did not correlate with workplace bullying ( $r = -0.14, ns$ ).

In Step 1 of the regression model, the control variables accounted for 6% of the variance in voluntary turnover intentions. When organizational embeddedness was added in Step 2, an additional 15% of the variance in turnover intentions was explained. In Step 3 of the regression model when the interaction effect was added, this moderating effect explained a further 10% of the variance. These model results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Research Model Results  
Voluntary Turnover Intentions**

| Variables              | Model 1      |         | Model 2      |         | Model 3      |         |
|------------------------|--------------|---------|--------------|---------|--------------|---------|
|                        | $\Delta RSq$ | $\beta$ | $\Delta RSq$ | $\beta$ | $\Delta RSq$ | $\beta$ |
| Step 1: Controls       | 0.06**       |         |              |         |              |         |
| Age                    |              | -0.12   |              | -0.11   |              | -0.11   |
| Education              |              | 0.18**  |              | 0.17**  |              | 0.18**  |
| Job Tenure             |              | -0.19** |              | -0.18** |              | -0.18** |
| Step 2: Main Effect    |              |         | 0.15**       |         |              |         |
| Org. Embeddedness      |              |         |              | -0.31** |              | 0.12    |
| Step 3: Interaction    |              |         |              |         | 0.10**       |         |
| OE X WB                |              |         |              |         |              | 0.37**  |
| Total RSq.             |              |         |              |         |              |         |
| Total F Value (6.47**) |              |         |              |         |              | 0.29    |

All hypotheses postulated in this research study were supported by the regression results to varying degrees. As shown in Table 2, Hypothesis 1 which postulated a negative relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions was supported by the sample data ( $\beta = -0.31, p \leq 0.00$ ). With this significant relationship, testing the interaction effect of workplace bullying was permissible. Hypothesis 2, which stated that workplace bullying moderated the organizational embeddedness – turnover intention relationship, was significant with a  $\beta$  value of 0.37 at  $p \leq 0.05$ . This finding suggests that employees who are embedded in their organization are less likely to voluntarily leave, but this relationship weakens when workplace bullying is higher.

## DISCUSSION

The overarching goals of the current study were to (a) validate the negative relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions, and (b) assess the impact of workplace bullying on the organizational embeddedness-turnover intention relationship to determine whether such work conditions can have adverse effects. The study results provided support for all of the research hypotheses. The research results and the contributions of the study will now be discussed.

First, this study supported the idea that organizational embeddedness negatively predicted voluntary turnover

intentions. This finding is in line with the existing body of research that embraces organizational embeddedness as a valid indicator of voluntary turnover and its associated intentions (e.g. Lee et al., 2004; Mitchell et al., 2001; Yang, Ma and Hu, 2011). Studies by Singh (2016; 2017), which were conducted in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago were the first to validate this finding within a non-typical Caribbean sample. Indeed, most embeddedness research has been conducted in the U.S and U.K context. This current study therefore further validates the finding of Singh (2016; 2017) that organizational embeddedness can predict voluntary turnover intentions across a sample of multiple Caribbean nations as well. By reinforcing the generalizability of organizational embeddedness and its power as a valid predictor of turnover intentions, this study builds upon the existing body of embeddedness research, as well as, research on voluntary turnover models.

Second, and perhaps most important, this study provided support for the notion that employee embeddedness may not always have a favourable influence on voluntary turnover intentions. It recognized that work conditions can in fact affect the relationship between embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions in an adverse manner. More specifically, a work environment characterized by workplace bullying where employees feel they are victims can in fact weaken the negative relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions. Greene et al. (2018) in their study recognized that work conditions can have some impact on the embeddedness construct. For instance, they looked at work conditions consistent with workplace abuse and found that abusive supervision can have some impact on an employee's embeddedness. This study therefore reinforces the idea that organizational embeddedness can interact with adverse work conditions, in this instance workplace bullying, to weaken the effect of embeddedness on turnover intentions. Indeed, workplace bullying encompasses abusive acts beyond abusive supervision by recognizing that bullying acts are repeated and systematic, perpetrated by any organizational member (Einarsen et al., 2011). In this way, the current study reinforced the recent work of Greene et al. (2018) by highlighting the idea that workplace bullying is also consistent with unfavourable work conditions which can adversely affect the strength of organizational embeddedness as a predictor of favourable work intentions such as voluntary turnover.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have meaningful practical implications. Developing an understanding of the power of organizational embeddedness can help human resource professionals develop effective ways of increasing employee

retention from the earliest stages of the hiring process and throughout the employment relationship. As employers continuously strive to keep their talented employees while reducing voluntary turnover costs in difficult economic conditions, practitioners can benefit from developing embedded employees.

At the same time however, managers engaged in the process of people management must also recognize that employees are not immune to the work conditions within which they operate and that unfavourable work conditions can weaken the power of organizational embeddedness in predicting voluntary turnover intentions. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that workplace bullying has adverse effects within any work environment. However, practitioners must recognize that workplace bullying can also negatively impact on positive constructs like organizational embeddedness as well. In doing so, managers can develop strategies aimed not only at developing employee links, fit and sacrifice within their organization, but also policies aimed at addressing workplace bullying.

### **Research/Theoretical Implications**

This study has a number of implications for embeddedness research and theory. Indeed, the majority of embeddedness research asserts that high embeddedness is associated with lower voluntary turnover. This idea is further validated in this study. This research however, further extends embeddedness theory using reactance and conservation of resources theories to present an alternative view of organizational embeddedness by recognizing that work conditions consistent with workplace bullying can weaken the power of embeddedness as a predictor of turnover intentions. Emerging embeddedness research has called for a more comprehensive examination of embeddedness, beyond the typical positive associations of this construct. This study answers that call by exploring another side of embeddedness research, which suggests that bullying can adversely affect organizational embeddedness.

### **Limitations**

Although this study makes a number of contributions to practice and research, limitations must be acknowledged to properly interpret the results. First, the sample used in this research study can be considered limited since it was drawn by convenience through the use of key internal contacts across service companies. This factor can potentially limit the generalizability of the study results. Second, the cross-sectional research design used in this study can lead to common method variance since data is collected at one point in time for all of the research variables. A cross-lagged

panel or longitudinal research design can be used in future to address this limitation. Third, only the role of organizational embeddedness (on-the-job factors) was tested in predicting turnover intentions. The off-the-job factors, also called community embeddedness were not assessed.

## Future Research

This study offers several research opportunities worthy of exploration in the future. First, future research can replicate the research model in other samples to further enhance the generalizability of the study findings. It may be useful if future researchers used samples from other countries and other cultures to determine the generalizability of the study results. Second, it would be interesting if future research builds from this current study by testing the research relationships within a longitudinal design to address common method variance and to assess causal changes in embeddedness and turnover intentions due to workplace bullying.

## CONCLUSION

This study found that organizational embeddedness negatively predicted voluntary turnover intentions. More importantly, it also found that workplace bullying moderated the relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions. It found that the relationship between organizational embeddedness and voluntary turnover intentions weakened when workplace bullying was higher within the work environment. These findings are important since few studies have explored the factors that can potentially weaken the power of the embeddedness construct in predicting voluntary turnover and other positive organizational outcomes.

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