

# A century of labour turnover research: A systematic literature review

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## Abstract

Labour turnover has been an important research topic in social science over the past century, involving disciplines such as human resource management, industrial relations, organizational behaviour, individual and organizational psychology, economics and health sciences. This paper presents a systematic literature review of voluntary labour turnover, providing an in-depth analysis of 1375 labour turnover studies published up to July 2019 in 142 academic journals listed in the Chartered Association of Business Schools *Academic Journal Guide 2018*. The analysis of theoretical and empirical labour turnover studies reveals: (1) distinctive foci in the development of labour turnover research over the past hundred years; (2) relative lack of attention to testing specific labour turnover theories; (3) a prevailing quantitative approach to identifying antecedents of labour turnover; (4) increased reliance on turnover intention as a proxy for actual turnover. This paper highlights these trends over time, providing insight into problematic areas from theoretical, methodological and empirical points of view. We suggest avenues for a more productive route to coherent theoretical, methodological and empirical development of labour turnover research.

## INTRODUCTION

*Voluntary employee turnover* (hereafter turnover) is as old as employment itself, but as a subject of academic inquiry has existed for just over a century (Diemer, 1917; Fisher, 1917). Competition for skilled employees and episodic labour market shortages coupled with skills mismatches necessitate better understanding of turnover (WEF, 2020). Continued interest in turnover in recent decades is unsurprising given the consequences for organizations' human capital (Dess & Shaw, 2001) and organizational perfor-

mance (Park & Shaw, 2013). For individual employees, turnover is often emotionally stressful (Klotz & Bolino, 2016), with financial and other consequences. Individuals who leave organizations risk losing contact with former colleagues (Boswell et al., 2005) and employment benefits like health insurance (Vardaman et al., 2008). Given these consequences, there have been calls for further research to enhance understanding of the causes and consequences (Hom et al., 2017). Recent research shows potentially positive outcomes of turnover, for example from 'boomerang' employees, where returnees share their experiences of having worked elsewhere (Shipp et al., 2014; Swider et al., 2017).

Turnover has attracted the attention of practitioners, policy makers and academics, but remains in some

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respects an enigma, despite continuing efforts to advance theory. The first major theory of turnover was proposed by March and Simon (1958), who suggested that *ease of movement* and *desirability of movement* were central concepts to explain how organizational and individual factors contribute to the 'stay or leave' decision of an employee. After 60 years, turnover researchers are still largely preoccupied with identifying new antecedents to turnover, paying less attention to calls to advance understanding of the phenomenon itself (Hom et al., 2017).

Considering the volume of literature, authors of reviews have chosen strategically to focus on specific aspects of turnover using meta-analyses and narrative techniques. Meta-analyses revealed antecedents to turnover but provided limited advancement in conceptualizing turnover (Jiang et al., 2012; Rubenstein et al., 2018). Narrative turnover reviews (Holtom et al., 2008; Hom et al., 2017; Morrell et al., 2001; Porter & Steers, 1973; Winterton, 2004) summarized turnover theories, but rarely reported criteria for including literature as proposed by Pickering and Byrne (2014). Other reviews focused on a limited number of journals (Allen et al., 2014) or only considered actual turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2018).

Three streams of literature, based on different dependent variables, are delineated as follows: first, on *actual turnover*, 'the voluntary cessation of membership of an organization by an employee of that organization' (Morrell et al., 2001, p. 220); second, on *turnover intention*, 'the conscious and deliberate willingness of an employee to leave an organization' (Tett & Meyer, 1993, p. 262); and third, on *labour retention*, an 'employee's desire to stay' (Chiu et al., 2002, p. 407). Even though they are related, there is little interaction between these three streams, resulting in a fragmented body of knowledge.

The dominant paradigm of traditional turnover theories has resulted in increased understanding of 'what' causes turnover (Price, 1977), as well as insights into 'how' the process evolves (Mobley, 1977). Turnover is often expressed in aggregate percentages, thereby losing important qualitative nuances, despite empirical evidence of differences between high and low performers (Sturman et al., 2012), stayers and job seekers (Woo & Allen, 2014), stayers and leavers (Hom et al., 2012). Less attention has been paid to turnover rates of groups of employees of different strategic value (Lepak & Snell, 2002), despite calls to consider the roles of leavers (Dalton et al., 1982; Jackofsky, 1984). Recent theory has addressed the depletion of *human capital* and 'how often' employees leave organizations (Call et al., 2015), but few studies have considered this empirically. Turnover has been studied in a wide range of contexts, which is a strength for building theory but also a challenge for comparison and transfer.

Using a structured approach, we provide a comprehensive overview of the state of knowledge of turnover, first identifying broad patterns, then mapping developments in theory and advances in methodology. A systematic review was chosen because it is open to replication, transparent about data acquisition and analysis, and has explanatory power to provide clear conclusions and directions for future research (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Pickering & Byrne, 2014).

This review systematically charts the three streams of turnover research noted above historically. Previous reviews advanced understanding but were less comprehensive by design. Hom et al. (2017) focused on the *Journal of Applied Psychology*; Holtom et al. (2008) covered research of the preceding 50 years; whereas Allen et al. (2014) provided a content analysis of the theory and methods in turnover research spanning 52 years.

The contribution of this paper is that it builds on and extends previous reviews by including both empirical and theoretical articles, as well as studies on labour retention and turnover intention, which fell out of scope in some reviews (Allen et al., 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2018). In doing so, we provide some original insights into the evolution of turnover research, tracing the origins and development of ideas and anticipating the suggestions of Rojon et al. (2021, p. 208) 'to offer critical and conceptual synthesis'. Hom et al. (2017) provide an excellent narrative assessment, whereas Allen et al. (2014) offer a more quantitative assessment addressing analytical understanding and the transition of turnover research in the previous century. Our review combines both approaches and is the most comprehensive review of turnover literature in Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) journals, covering 1375 articles.

After summarizing the method employed in this review, an overview is provided of the broad characteristics of articles, such as their number and focus, journal category and geographic origin. We then analyse conceptual and empirical articles to plot the evolution of turnover research, comparing studies of actual turnover and turnover intention. We summarize the key findings, propose ways of advancing theory and research methodologies, and identify implications for practice.

## METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED IN THIS REVIEW

Systematic literature reviews are increasingly used in management and social science (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Macpherson & Jones, 2010; Thomas & Tee, 2021). For this review, the 15-steps method developed by Pickering

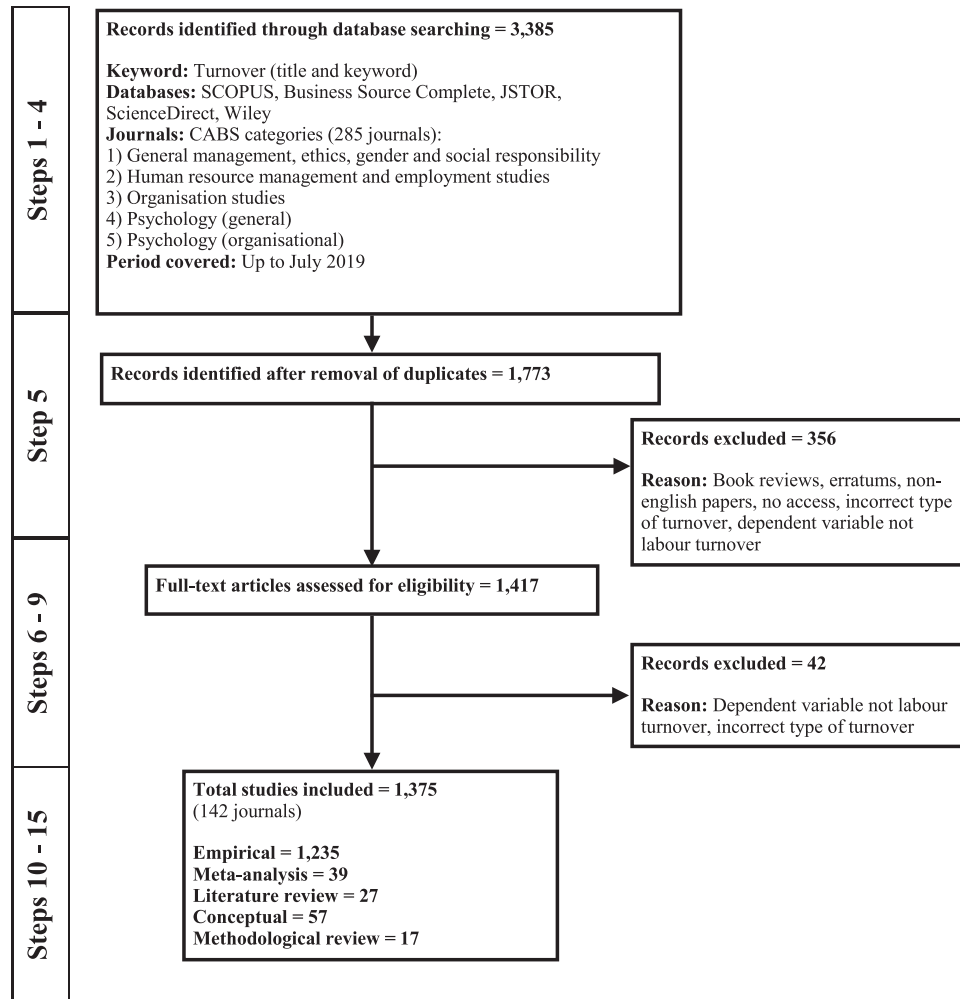


FIGURE 1 Systematic literature review process. *Source:* Derived from Pickering and Byrne (2014)

and Byrne (2014) was adapted and applied, as shown in Figure 1.

*Steps 1–4.* Step 1 established the overall topic for the review to be labour turnover, with studies using turnover as their outcome variable. Step 2 established the focus and interest of the review to explore broad characteristics of articles on turnover, as well as theories and methods used. Step 3, that is, locating articles on labour turnover, focused on the keyword ‘turnover’. Articles on involuntary turnover were excluded because involuntary and voluntary turnover are distinct concepts (Morrell et al., 2001). Step 4 involved identifying and searching databases. To build a comprehensive database, we set the search boundary as articles in academic journals in the CABS *Academic Journal Guide* (AJG) (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2018) in the following categories: general management, ethics, gender and social responsibility; human resource management and employment studies; organization studies; psychology (general); and psychology (organizational). A search in title and keywords was conducted

using the electronic databases SCOPUS, Business Source Complete, JSTOR, ScienceDirect and Wiley, and included articles published up to July 2019.

In SCOPUS, the Boolean string “[TITLE (‘Turnover’)] OR [AUTHKEY (‘Turnover’)] AND [EXACTSRCTITLE (‘Academy of Management Journal’)]” was entered in the search field. This procedure was repeated for each journal identified and yielded an initial total of 3385 articles. For each journal, articles were extracted from the database providing the highest number of hits. This was decided after a comparison of duplicates for journals with over 100 hits. The search yielded a total of 1773 journal articles.

*Steps 5–9.* Step 5 involved reading the title and abstract of each article to establish relevance for inclusion. The main inclusion criterion was that the article had to focus on actual turnover, turnover intention or labour retention as the dependent variable, excluding other kinds of turnover (such as financial or sales turnover), which eliminated 356 articles. Articles not published in English, book reviews, duplicates, articles developing a scale and errata were also

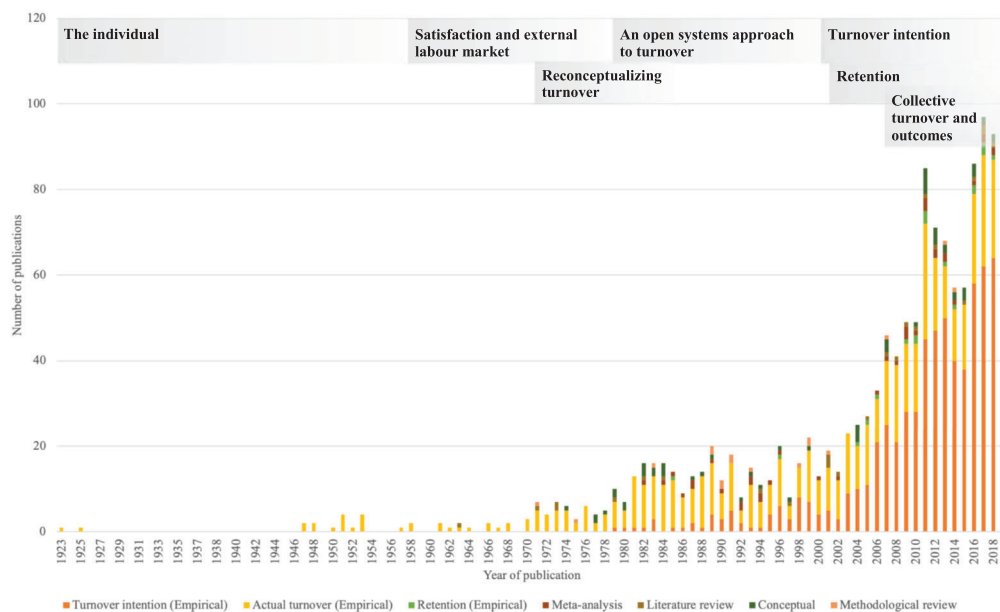


FIGURE 2 The foci of turnover research [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

excluded, leaving a total of 1417 articles for full-text assessment. Step 6 involved the development of a database in which all citations were stored in an Excel spreadsheet (Rashman et al., 2009), with multiple data analysis sheets for coding purposes. Articles were imported into Atlas.TI (Friese et al., 2018) qualitative data analysis software to facilitate a structured way of organizing and reading articles. Categories and subcategories were identified concurrently with reading and analysing articles. Step 7 involved coding articles in tranches of 10% of the total, followed by meetings of co-authors to discuss discrepancies. During Step 8, another 42 articles were excluded for being out of scope, leaving 1375 articles. In Step 9, all articles were read and assessed, concurrently checking and revising categories.

*Steps 10–15.* The number of articles included, that is, 1375, far exceeds the suggestion of around 300 by Pickering and Byrne (2014), but this is not unusual for turnover reviews (Allen et al., 2014) and our aim was a comprehensive review. The final data extraction sheets were used to evaluate key results, identify shortcomings and suggest areas for further research. A bibliography of articles included can be obtained from the authors upon request.

## FINDINGS

This section presents an overview of our findings from the systematic literature review. Figure 2 shows the number of articles published over time. In total, 1375 articles are included, comprising 1235 empirical articles, 39 meta-

analyses, 27 literature reviews, 57 conceptual articles and 17 methodological reviews.

Figure 2 confirms that turnover is a relatively mature field of research but also a field that has attracted increased interest over the past two decades. While the increase in articles appears continuous, the number of turnover publications declined after the 2008 financial and economic crises, discussed below. Empirical studies using actual turnover as the dependent variable have increased steadily but less than those using turnover intention, which account for 66% ( $n = 605$ ) of studies published since 2001, compared with 22% ( $n = 60$ ) up to and including 2000. Research on retention has increased sporadically but to a lesser extent than research on turnover intention and actual turnover. The scattered but increasing number of meta-analyses, literature reviews, conceptual articles and methodological reviews also attests to increased interest in labour turnover research.

A Google Scholar citation analysis (August 2020) revealed the most cited article was Huselid (1995) on the impact of human resource management practices on turnover and other organizational outcomes, with almost 13 000 citations. Two articles on organizational commitment were the next most highly cited (Porter et al., 1974: around 10 000 citations; Meyer et al., 2002: almost 9000 citations).

In terms of CABS categories, over one-third (37%) of articles were published in the AJG category of psychology (organizational); followed by human resource management and employment studies (30%); general management, ethics, gender and social responsibility (22%);



organization studies (8%); and psychology (general) (3%). Almost half (44%) of the articles included in this review were published in journals in CABS category 4\* (9%) and 4 (35%); followed by category 3 (23%); category 2 (21%); and category 1 (12%). Two-thirds (67%) of articles were published in journals of category 3 and above, which is indicative of the perceived importance of turnover.

The journals with the highest number of articles included are: *Journal of Applied Psychology* ( $n = 131$ ); *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* ( $n = 118$ ); *Journal of Vocational Behavior* ( $n = 72$ ); *Human Relations* ( $n = 59$ ); *Academy of Management Journal* ( $n = 57$ ); *Personnel Review* ( $n = 45$ ); *Journal of Management* ( $n = 41$ ); and *Human Resource Management (USA)* ( $n = 40$ ). A list of journals included, with the corresponding number of articles from each, is shown in Appendix 1.

The geographical distribution of authors of the 1375 publications covers 63 countries, with the majority from the United States (50%), followed by Canada (5%), China (5%), the United Kingdom (4%), Australia (4%) and The Netherlands (3%). Empirical studies ( $n = 1235$ ) were more often published in North America, involving only American authors (42%), compared with articles published outside North America, involving non-American authors (38%). Of the empirical studies outside North America, 10% involved American authors, and 7% of studies failed to identify location. Most articles involve authors in the same country (82%), with international collaboration rarely extending beyond two countries. Other articles, including literature reviews, conceptual articles and methodological reviews, have been overwhelmingly from North America (86%).

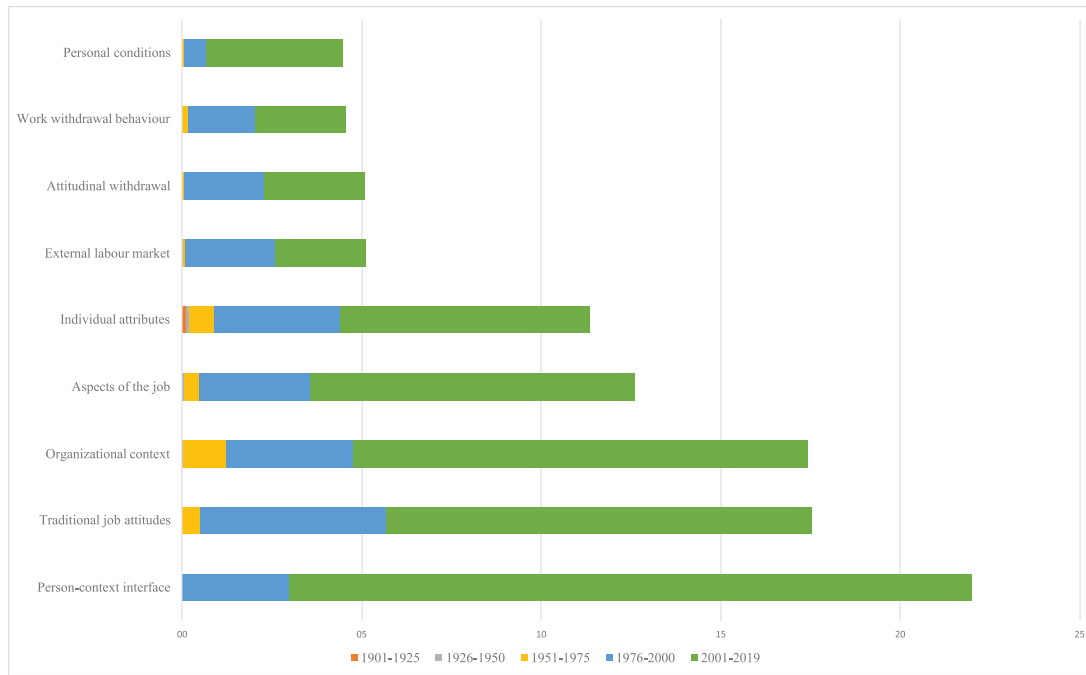
Empirical articles ( $n = 1235$ ) were reviewed by each author to identify dependent variables, independent variables, industries and occupations, geographical location of the study, underpinning theory and perceptions of turnover. The dependent variable used was turnover intention in 53% of empirical studies, actual turnover in 44% and labour retention in 3% of studies. A single dependent variable was involved in 69% of studies, whereas 31% investigated multiple dependent variables. Since 2001, turnover intention has been employed more than actual turnover, yet most turnover theories were developed with actual turnover as the outcome, so empirical research has become less aligned with theory developed to explain actual turnover behaviour (Allen et al., 2014).

We analysed the independent variables of empirical studies from direct effects stated in hypotheses using the categories of a recent meta-analysis (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Like Allen et al. (2014), we found that most studies only test direct effects, but we also analysed variables investigated over 25-year intervals. Figure 3 shows that most studies involved factors related to the person–context inter-

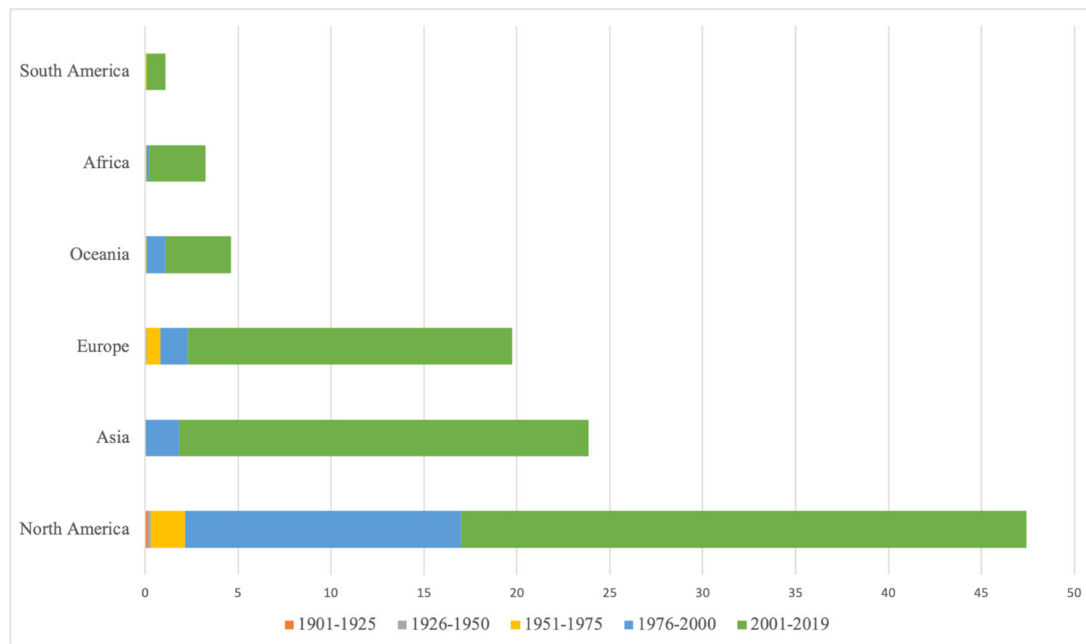
face (22%); followed by traditional job attitudes (18%), organizational context (17%), aspects of the job (13%), individual attributes (11%), external labour market (5%), attitudinal withdrawal (5%), personal conditions (5%) and work withdrawal behaviour (4%). Since 2001 there has been increased interest in variables comprising the person–context interface, organizational context and traditional job attitudes. Hom et al. (2017) described how turnover research developed over time, and this review reveals the extent to which there has been a shift in antecedents under investigation.

In terms of sector and occupational focus, most empirical studies (64%,  $n = 790$ ) focused on a single sector, but one-third (36%) involved several or did not specify the sector. Of single-sector studies, healthcare was most prevalent (19%), followed by manufacturing (18%), services (17%), finance (11%), retail (8%), education (7%), information technology (6%), military (5%), hospitality (5%), transportation (2%), construction (1%) and energy (1%), with the remainder in sports and agriculture. Interest moved from manufacturing (1900–1975) to a wider range of sectors from 1976. Since 2001, most of the 527 empirical studies were conducted in services (19%,  $n = 98$ ), followed by healthcare (18%,  $n = 95$ ) then manufacturing (14%,  $n = 76$ ), with the remainder in a wide range of sectors. The changing sector focus reflects economic restructuring with the decline of manufacturing and growth of services, but also demonstrates that turnover is an issue affecting most sectors, even if average turnover rates vary substantially across economies. What constitutes unacceptably high levels of turnover is very context-specific: hotels are known to experience annual turnover of more than 200% (Cheng & Brown, 1998) and clothing manufacture 27% on average (Taplin et al., 2003); levels that would be considered unmanageable in a knowledge-intensive sector (Shankar & Ghosh, 2013). Hospitals have been the focus of substantial research, probably because of the high costs of training nurses. In terms of occupation, 25% of the studies focused on specific occupations, whereas 75% included employees from several occupations.

The analysis of geographical distribution showed most empirical studies were conducted in North America (47%), followed by Asia (24%) then Europe (20%). Figure 4 shows the geography of turnover articles over successive 25-year intervals. The increase in turnover articles from Asia and Europe is noteworthy. In the United States, of those studies indicating a sector ( $n = 396$ ), 20% were in healthcare, 16% in the service sector, 15% in manufacturing and 11% in finance. Similarly, in Europe, among the studies indicating a sector ( $n = 121$ ), 29% were in healthcare and mostly in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, 19% were in manufacturing and mostly in the United Kingdom, and 16% were in services and mostly in Norway. In Asia, of the sector studies ( $n = 171$ ), 23% were in manufacturing, mostly in



**FIGURE 3** Labour turnover antecedents in empirical studies by 25-year intervals (%). *Source:* Categories from Rubenstein et al. (2018) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



**FIGURE 4** Locus of empirical studies by continent over 25-year intervals (%) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

China, and 21% in services, mostly in India, South Korea and China. In Oceania, of studies citing a sector ( $n = 33$ ), 30% were in services, 24% in healthcare and 15% in manufacturing, mostly undertaken in Australia. In Africa, of the sector studies ( $n = 22$ ), 15% were in manufacturing and 15% in finance, mostly in South Africa.

The underpinning theories of empirical studies could be ascertained from the abstract for 20% of studies, but for the remainder, purpose, hypotheses and argument were explored in the full text. About 64% of studies referred to a specific theory and on average two theories were involved. *Social exchange theory* (Blau, 1964) was used most

often, followed by *conservation of resources theory* (Hobfoll, 1989), *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), *job-demands resources theory* (Demerouti et al., 2001), *equity theory* (Adams, 1965), *organizational support theory* (Eisenberger et al., 1986), *leader-member exchange theory* (Dansereau et al., 1975), *human capital theory* (Becker, 1964), *self-determination theory* (Gagné & Deci, 2005), *expectancy theory* (Vroom, 1964) and the *theory of reasoned action/behaviour* (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Over the whole period, there is no clear association between the use of theory and journal category (CABS AJG). The highest proportion of articles employing theory is in journals of category 3 (71%) compared with category 2 (67%), category 4 (60%), category 1 (58%) and category 4\* (51%). However, for articles published since 2010, the utility of theory has improved significantly, with almost 79% using a theory. Since 2010, the highest proportion of articles employing theory is in journals in category 4\* (96%), followed by category 3 (80%), category 2 (77%), category 4 (75%) and category 1 (68%).

The idea that ‘not all turnover is bad’ (Holtom et al., 2005, p. 338) has been echoed by others (Allen et al., 2010; Hom et al., 2020) and some have noted positive outcomes for individuals and organizations (Dalton et al., 1982; Mobley, 1982; Price, 1977). Considering perceptions of turnover, each empirical study was coded on whether the perception of turnover was predominantly negative, predominantly positive, discussed both positive and negative aspects, or was neutral. Most empirical articles (60%) took a neutral perspective, 33% viewed turnover in negative terms, 7% addressed both aspects, whereas fewer than 1% had a positive perspective. For the periods 1976–2000 and 2001–2019, most studies had a neutral perception of turnover (56% and 70%, respectively), followed by a predominantly negative perception (16% and 37%, respectively). The predominance of negative over positive perceptions of turnover, and the increase in negative views since 2001, is surprising given empirical evidence that turnover is not inherently ‘bad’ (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Swider et al., 2017).

## The foci of turnover research

The changing foci of turnover research, as shown in Figure 2, were identified through a chronological assessment hinging upon pivotal advances in theory. Unsurprisingly, the evolution of turnover research has been neither linear nor entirely sequential. What is distinctive about this review is that the periods identified relate to the arrival and emergence of key ideas, which sometimes overlap one another like tectonic plates. For ease of representation, however, fixed periods of 25 years are distinguished as follows: (1) the individual (1901–1925); (2) waning of inter-

est in labour turnover (1926–1950); (3) satisfaction and the external labour market (1951–1975); (4) reconceptualizing turnover (1976–2000); (5) intention, retention and *collective turnover* (2001–2019). The focus of this review is on articles published in CABS-listed journals, but we have also included, where relevant, books that we regard as seminal works.

### Period 1: The individual (1901–1925)

Research into turnover began once its cost to organizations was recognized. The earliest books (Colvin, 1919; Emmet, 1919) were published around the same time as the first articles on turnover in academic journals (Diemer, 1917; Fisher, 1917). This interest was probably driven by unprecedented levels of turnover in US manufacturing before the First World War. Colvin (1919) reported turnover as high as 600% in some Detroit plants in 1912 and 1913. Emmet (1919) mentioned the Special Committee on Labor Turnover convened at the Rochester (NY) National Convention of Employment Managers in 1918. The turnover crisis was associated with fragmentation of work involving deskilling and reduced training time: ‘we took away all the interesting parts of the work and made the men into attachments to machines, demanding in many cases that they follow exact motions laid down by others, in performing their daily tasks’ (Colvin, 1919, p. 7). No direct reference was made to Taylor (1911), but the description of separating conception from execution and dehumanizing work resonates with analyses of Taylorism (Braverman, 1974). War demands exacerbated the situation and workers were rapidly trained as operators of a single machine, rather than on the whole range of engineering tools like machinists trained through traditional apprenticeships. This deskilling facilitated operator movement by reducing ties to a particular employer and made them more disposed to leave unrewarding work.

Early empirical turnover research was concerned with identifying individual characteristics associated with turnover, for example through mental alertness tests (Snow, 1923) and evaluating social status (Bills, 1925). The books by Colvin (1919) and Emmet (1919) were followed by others exploring turnover (Brissenden & Frankel, 1921, 1922; Fish, 1922; Slichter, 1919) and were accompanied by more journal articles.

### Period 2: Waning of interest in labour turnover (1926–1950)

From 1923, turnover in US manufacturing fell substantially, inevitably reaching far lower levels with the onset

of the Great Depression, which explains the waning of academic interest at that time. The publication of books on turnover follows the business cycle, which is logical because turnover is likely to be more prevalent and disruptive during economic booms when labour markets are tight. Turnover increased again during the Second World War, sparking renewed interest through the ensuing period of relative economic stability, as evidenced by empirical work focusing on the visual ability of the employee (Kephart, 1948), weighted application blank tests (Mosel & Wade 1951) and intelligence tests (Kriedt & Gadel, 1953). In this way, researchers aimed to predict and control future costs associated with turnover.

### Period 3: Satisfaction and the external labour market (1951–1975)

The first attempt to develop a theory of turnover based on factors other than individual attributes came in the book *Organizations* (March & Simon, 1958, p. 99). This pivotal theory moved the focus of turnover studies by including labour market conditions, representing job opportunities (Farris, 1971) and individual conditions, notably job satisfaction (Hulin, 1968), as factors influencing turnover decisions; factors that endured in many subsequent turnover models. This shift, perhaps a function of the tight labour markets of the post-war boom, involved recognizing that turnover decisions could best be explained by a combination of individual, organizational and external labour market conditions rather than by single factors in isolation. During this period, attention also turned to measurement issues. Van der Merwe and Miller (1971) reviewed how turnover is measured and critiqued the approach of simply looking at overall turnover rates, arguing the need to distinguish *controllable turnover* and *uncontrollable turnover*. Price (1975) raised fundamental issues of understanding, defining and measuring turnover. The most highly cited article during this period is on job satisfaction (Porter et al., 1974, almost 10 000 citations).

### Period 4: Reconceptualizing turnover (1976–2000)

Price's (1977) book was a seminal work on turnover because it systematically analysed evidence of correlates, determinants and intervening variables, developing a comprehensive *causal model of turnover*, for the first time bringing together determinants separately established by economists, psychologists and sociologists, setting a research agenda for the following decades. Price and Mueller (1981a,b) tested this model and the interven-

ing nature of job satisfaction and intention to stay in their study of turnover among nurses. Simultaneously, Mobley (1977) developed a *turnover process model* designed to explain how individuals arrive at turnover decisions.

Dalton et al. (1981) challenged prevailing perceptions by suggesting that turnover can be either *functional* or *dysfunctional*, both to organizations and to individuals. Jackofsky (1984) considered functionality or dysfunctionality of turnover based on employee performance, noting the ambiguity of previous empirical studies exploring job performance and turnover. Proposing a U-shaped relationship, Jackofsky (1984) argued that employees with low performance were likely to be managed out or leave during the induction crisis, recognizing that they cannot make the grade, whereas high performers would experience greater ease of movement because they have higher competence to offer to prospective employers. The influence of these key works has been recognized by turnover experts (Hom et al., 2020) and is evident from citations (e.g. Mobley, 1977, around 3500 citations; Price, 1977, around 2000 citations).

As interest in turnover increased, researchers began identifying and testing variables to explain turnover in different organizational contexts, which we characterize following Harney and Dundon (2006, p. 50) as an 'open systems' approach. The expansion of variables was triggered by the *process and content model* (Mobley et al., 1979), which included job-related, external, moderating and process variables prior to turnover behaviour. Mobley's (1982) book recognized that turnover could have positive effects, depending upon which individuals are leaving, proposing a more sophisticated analysis of the effects of turnover, and arguing that 'the effective management of turnover requires a diagnostic-evaluative perspective' (Mobley, 1982, p. 137). The *unfolding model of turnover* (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) proposed that turnover can be caused by *shocks* leading to different paths, some of which emerge unexpectedly, so cannot be foreseen by individuals and organizations. Few empirical studies have tested the propositions of the unfolding model of turnover (Morrell et al., 2008), and results on its utility are mixed. Donnelly and Quirin (2006) found 84% of their sample in the proposed turnover paths, whereas Niederman et al. (2007) found only 12%. The influence of these models is also evident from citation rates, with Lee and Mitchell (1994) and Mobley (1977) each having over 2000 citations.

### Period 5: Intention, retention and collective turnover (2001–2019)

After decades of research on turnover, ambiguities in concepts and models led to calls for the development of a new theory (Morell et al., 2001). The period is characterized by



three changes in turnover research: an increasing amount of empirical research on turnover intention as a dependent variable; a shift from focusing on turnover to retention; and a consideration of collective turnover.

Most conceptual articles treat intention to quit as a precursor to actual turnover, suggesting they are related but separate constructs (Lee et al., 1999; Mobley et al., 1979; Porter & Steers, 1973; Price & Mueller, 1981b; Tett & Meyer, 1993), potentially with different explanatory antecedents (Kirschenbaum & Weisberg, 1990; Winterton, 2004). The increasing predominance of turnover intention as a proxy for actual turnover is therefore surprising, given that turnover intention does not necessarily lead to actual turnover behaviour (Purl et al., 2016).

With a shift of focus from turnover to retention, Mitchell et al. (2001) developed *job embeddedness theory*, aiming to predict why employees stay in an organization based on their fit, links and sacrifice within the organization and their community. Job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) has become very influential, with over 3000 citations in only two decades, and this review found it to be the most empirically tested of all turnover theories.

The antecedents of turnover have mostly been investigated at the individual level and largely in isolation (Griffeth et al., 2000). Recent research has considered outcomes when groups of employees leave an organization, which can be more damaging to the stock of human capital (Glebbeek & Bax, 2004). Empirical studies on collective turnover are evidenced by meta-analyses (Hancock et al., 2013, 2017; Heavey et al., 2013; Park & Shaw, 2013). Collective turnover theories have been developed that recognize the need to include group-level factors, including contagion effects, leading to multiple quits (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013). Collective turnover theory emphasizes the loss of human capital associated with collective departure of employees, thereby offering a better understanding of organizational impact.

Table 1 shows the evolution of turnover research across the five periods.

## THE EVOLUTION OF THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS

March and Simon (1958) offered the first 'explicit, formal and systematic conceptual analysis of the withdrawal process' (Hom et al., 2020, p. 72). March and Simon (1958) proposed a general theory of motivation, whereby the balance between an organization's inducements and individual employees' contributions is related to perceptions of both the desirability and ease of leaving the organization. Although few studies directly tested this theory, its influence on subsequent turnover theory was pervasive and

persistent, to the extent that Lee and Mitchell (1994) suggested it hampered the development of subsequent conceptual models. It was 15 years before Porter and Steers (1973) introduced the concept of *met expectations*, proposing that unmet expectations lead to job dissatisfaction and subsequently turnover. Alternative job opportunities were not considered, yet these might explain why some individuals experiencing unmet expectations and job dissatisfaction do not leave.

Mobley (1977) explored the relationship between job dissatisfaction and turnover, postulating a 10-step process with a series of intermediate linkages, each stage involving a decision that can arrest the process. Mobley's (1977) work proved pivotal and 'inspired subsequent theoretical elaborations or refinements' (Hom et al., 2020, p. 78). Those refinements addressed, *inter alia*: factors influencing job satisfaction (Mobley et al., 1979); different ways the intermediate linkages operate (Hom & Griffeth, 1991); different routes to turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994); and the final stages of quitting (Steers & Mowday, 1981).

Another approach came from an entirely different source, starting with the causal model by Price (1977, pp. 66–91), developed from a codification review of previous turnover research and subsequently refined (Price & Blue-dorn, 1980; Price & Mueller, 1981a,b, 1986). Hom et al. (2020, p. 82) argued Price's (1977) 'causal determinants are empirically well grounded', although rigorous systematic testing of the Price–Mueller models failed to explain variance in turnover as effectively as competing models by Hom et al. (1984) and Mobley (1977). Two distinctive theoretical approaches thereafter developed in parallel, one involving Price and colleagues at Iowa and the other a network involving Griffeth, Hom and Mobley, the former based on structural determinants and the latter on processes of turnover.

Further refinements (Mobley et al., 1979) and theoretical models (Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980) more explicitly included the role of economic conditions. Economic conditions influence the extent to which individual and organizational factors are conducive to turnover behaviour, a buoyant economy offering a more permissive context. Apart from these two models, economic factors have not been as prominent in turnover models as individual and job characteristics, despite substantial evidence that turnover is strongly procyclical (Carillo-Tudela & Coles, 2016). The business cycle could explain the dip in publications between 2011 and 2016 evident in Figure 2, as a lagged effect of higher US unemployment between 2009 and 2014.

After Mobley et al. (1979), subsequent models focused on the role of *job commitment* in turnover (Farrell & Rus-bult, 1981) and emphasized the dynamics of the withdrawal process (Sheridan & Abelson, 1983). The *cusp catastrophe model* (Sheridan & Abelson, 1983) explicitly

TABLE 1 Summary of the five chronological periods

Duration	1901–1925	1926–1950	1951–1975	1976–2000	2001–2019
Key papers	Fisher (1917) Diemer (1917)	Kephart (1948) Mosel and Wade (1951)	March and Simon (1958) Van der Merwe and Miller (1971) Porter and Steers (1973) Price (1975)	Mobley (1977) Price (1977) Dalton et al. (1981) Jackofsky (1984) Lee and Mitchell (1994)	Mitchell et al. (2001) Hom et al. (2012) Nyberg and Ployhart (2013) Hom et al. (2017)
Key antecedents	Individual attributes	Individual attributes	Organizational context	Traditional job attitudes	Person–context interface
Key construct	e.g. mental alertness	e.g. visual ability	e.g. working conditions	e.g. job satisfaction	e.g. leader and supervisory relationships
Key continent	North America	North America	North America	North America	North America
Key sector	Finance and manufacturing	Manufacturing	Manufacturing	Healthcare	Healthcare
Key sector focus	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
Key occupation	Specified and not specified	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified
Key perception	Negative and neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Key social science theory	–	–	–	Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964)	Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964)
Key journal category	4*	4*	4	4	4
Key turnover theory	–	–	–	Intermediate linkages model (Mobley, 1977)	Job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001)
Key method	Quantitative	Quantitative	Quantitative	Quantitative	Quantitative
Key data collection tool	Survey	Organizational record	Survey	Survey	Survey
Key time horizon	Static cohort	Static cohort	Static cohort	Static cohort	Cross-sectional
Key timeframe	Within and over a year	Within a year	Within a year	Within a year	Within a year
Key level of analysis	Individual	Individual	Individual	Individual	Individual
Key perspective	Employee	Employee	Employee	Employee	Employee
Key number of dependent variables	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
Key voluntariness	No differentiation	No differentiation	No differentiation	Voluntary turnover	Voluntary turnover
Key voluntariness source	–	Organizational records	Organizational records	Organizational records	Organizational records
Key turnover intention measure	–	–	–	Cammann et al. (1979)	Bozeman and Ferrewé (2001)

recognized withdrawal outcomes as multiple and discontinuous, which Hom et al. (2020, p. 96) acknowledge as a 'major breakthrough in thinking about turnover'.

Turnover as a concept has been an area for refinement, with Dalton et al. (1982) introducing a taxonomy differentiating between functional and dysfunctional turnover and Abelson (1987) distinguishing *avoidable and unavoidable turnover* based on the extent of organizational control. Empirical studies have paid little attention to these advances, although there is more recognition that not all turnover is negative and not necessarily something that should 'continuously be reduced' (Bluedorn, 1982, p. 12).

By the 1990s, the dominant paradigm involved derivative strands of several turnover theories (March & Simon, 1958; Mobley, 1977; Price, 1977). The unfolding model of turnover developed by Lee and Mitchell (1994) drew on these earlier strands and had in common with the cusp catastrophe model (Sheridan & Abelson, 1983) the notion that decisions about quitting are prompted by a shock and involve multiple routes (Steers & Mowday, 1981). Describing the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) as 'a ground-breaking theoretical achievement', Hom et al. (2017, p. 7) noted it identified novel constructs and processes that deepen insight into why and how employees quit. The unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) also pioneered qualitative approaches taken up by later theorists. A key weakness was its dependence on retrospective evidence from leavers (Griffeth & Hom, 2001) and, as Hom et al. (2020, p. 106) note, only interviewing leavers amounts to 'sampling on the dependent variable', since stayers may have experienced the same shocks.

The unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) was enhanced by Mitchell and Lee (2001), who focused on stayers as opposed leavers to propose a new construct of job embeddedness. Empirical research showed that being embedded in the organization and the community was associated with reduced intent to leave and actual turnover (Mitchell et al., 2001). Maertz and Griffeth (2004) argued the need to integrate commitment constructs with turnover models and proposed a conceptual framework explaining why employees quit (or stay) in terms of *eight motivational forces*. Later theoretical models emphasized the process in which individuals make decisions over time (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005; Steel, 2002) and further elaborated the role of shocks (Griffeth et al., 2008).

More recently, there has been interest in collective turnover at group, unit and organizational levels (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). Nyberg and Ployhart (2013) developed *context-emergent turnover theory* to explain the impact of collective turnover, hinting at antecedents such as organizational climate and labour-market conditions. This approach is consistent with earlier work suggesting that human resource (HR) systems and processes influ-

ence collective turnover at establishment level (Arthur, 1994). What is noteworthy about other recent turnover theories is that they focus on the types of employees and subpopulations of organizations. For example, Hom et al. (2012) identified types of employees based on their *proximal withdrawal state*. Woo and Allen (2014) distinguished four types of employees based on their intentions to stay or leave, and actions, resulting in *stayer-seeker prototypes*. Vande Griek (2020) introduced a typology of employees based on *proactive personality* and focus on *organizational career growth*. Researchers have yet to test empirically differences in turnover behaviour of subpopulations.

In short, there have been several shifts in turnover research away from what causes people to leave. First, reconceptualizing process and content models; second, focusing on what causes employees to stay; and third, studying collective turnover and consequences of turnover. The limited explanatory power of existing models may have driven the search for new theory. Most turnover research has been done by psychologists, so increased interest in context and collective turnover may also be a reaction to 'psychologization', highlighted in recent human resource and employee relations literature (Godard, 2014; Kaufmann, 2020). Increased interest in the consequences of turnover may similarly reflect 'financialization' of economies in the wake of the global financial crisis and the emergence of 'disconnected capitalism' (Thompson, 2013).

Besides identifying key conceptual contributions, we also analysed empirical studies testing turnover theories. Like Allen et al. (2014), we found that turnover theories are often the theoretical foundation for empirical studies, but rarely subject to direct empirical testing; we also found evidence of a shift towards using more general social science theories. Only 8% ( $n = 100$ ) of empirical studies in our review directly tested a turnover theory. Of those, 34% tested job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), 20% the intermediate linkages model (Mobley, 1977), 18% the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994), 7% the integrated process model of turnover and performance (Jackofsky, 1984), 7% the desirability/ease of movement model (March & Simon, 1958), 5% functional versus dysfunctional turnover (Dalton et al., 1982), 3% context-emergent turnover theory (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013), while the process model (Steers & Mowday, 1981), the causal model of turnover (Price, 1977) and proximal withdrawal states theory (Hom et al., 2012) each accounted for 2%. This means 95% of empirical articles have used theories developed at least 20 years ago.

The analysis of empirical studies testing turnover theories since 2001 ( $n = 66$ ) reveals a similar pattern, with 52% testing job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), 24% the unfolding model of turnover (Lee & Mitchell,

1994), 5% context-emergent turnover theory (Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013) and 3% proximal withdrawal states theory (Hom et al., 2012). This dependence on older theories begs the question of why newer theories are not being picked up in empirical work if their development reflects the limited explanatory power of older theories.

Further analysis of the dependent variable and the turnover theory tested revealed that 93% ( $n = 93$ ) employed only one dependent variable, whereas 7% investigated multiple organizational outcomes. Actual turnover is the main dependent variable for turnover theories, so it is unclear why other outcomes not included in turnover theories should be considered as dependent variables.

## REVIEW OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The methodology section of each empirical article ( $n = 1235$ ) was assessed against four characteristics: method and data collection tool; time horizon; level and unit of analysis; and measure of the dependent variable.

In terms of method, 95% ( $n = 1175$ ) of studies were purely quantitative, 2% ( $n = 24$ ) were qualitative, 2% ( $n = 18$ ) used multiple methods and 2% ( $n = 18$ ) mixed methods. The most common data collection tool was surveys (77%), followed by organizational records (9%), external databases (8%) and interviews (3%). Experiments, simulation, focus groups and observations accounted for only 3% of studies. Like Allen et al. (2014), whose review also provides insights into statistical analysis used in empirical studies, we find a dominant analytical mindset, which we believe retards theoretical and methodological development, by not testing turnover theories and replicating a relatively narrow range of methods.

In terms of the time horizon employed by empirical studies, using the categories distinguished by Allen et al. (2014), we found 52% ( $n = 643$ ) were cross-sectional, 26% ( $n = 320$ ) used a static cohort, 10% ( $n = 126$ ) were ex-post archival, 6% ( $n = 77$ ) were longitudinal, 3% ( $n = 39$ ) retrospective and 2% ( $n = 30$ ) involved repeated measures. Overall, 65% were conducted within the timeframe of 1 year. Of the remainder, the longest was 117 years, although the turnover data covered 80 years (Abrahamson, 1997).

The individual was the primary level of analysis in 89% of turnover studies, followed by the organization or a key representative (10%). Only 1% of studies used the team or department as a unit of analysis. In terms of perspective, only 7% included both managers and employees. Over-reliance on individual-level research is problematic because turnover involves two parties: employee and employer.

In terms of the dependent variable being studied, for studies of actual turnover ( $n = 550$ ), 65% explicitly focused on voluntary turnover, but the remainder did not distinguish from involuntary turnover. Of studies that made the distinction, 80% based this exclusively on organizational records, which may be inaccurate or unreliable (Abelson, 1987; Campion, 1991). Similarly, 16% relied solely on employee reports and only 4% reconciled organizational and employee reports.

Studies using turnover intention as the dependent variable ( $n = 665$ ) employed a total of 143 different measures, of which 60% were developed between 1976–2000 and 40% between 2001–2019. In the first period, three measures were particularly dominant: close to 40% of studies used the measure of Cammann et al. (1979); 20% used the measure of Mobley et al. (1978); and 14% used the measure of Wayne et al. (1997). Of the turnover intention measures developed between 2001 and 2019, those of Bozeman and Perrewé (2001) and Kuvaas (2006) were most often used, by 26% and 16% of studies, respectively. Analysis of the items belonging to each turnover intention measure exposes different meanings and there is little consistency between them in terms of the time horizon over which employees plan to leave. Despite the proliferation of measures of turnover intent, we found little conceptual development of the construct apart from Gaertner and Nollen (1992), who refined the notion of turnover intention by introducing a typology of *desire to stay (or leave)* and *intent to stay (or leave)*, suggesting that actual turnover is a result of desire to leave combined with intention to leave. Employees may desire to leave but intend to stay as they are locked into the organization, or desire to stay but intend to leave because of some discord or external factors.

## Turnover intention versus actual turnover

One important issue identified by this systematic review is the increased reliance on turnover intention as a proxy for actual turnover. The meta-analysis of Armitage and Conner (2001) has been used extensively to support the generic claim that intention and behaviour are correlated, but that analysis included only one study of turnover, which used turnover intention as the dependent variable. Dalton et al. (1999) suggested three criteria that would allow the use of turnover intention as a proxy for actual turnover: the relationship between the surrogate and variable under investigation must consistently meet a minimum correlation; the data of actual turnover must be unavailable; and the surrogate variable must best represent actual turnover. The meta-analysis of Griffeth et al. (2000) shows the intention-behaviour relationship for turnover does not meet these criteria. Another meta-analysis by Rubenstein et al. (2018,



p. 52) also concludes that ‘turnover intention and actual turnover are not identical and should not be treated as such’, arguing that treating turnover intentions as actual turnover leads to incorrect conclusions on related variables and could potentially give misleading results. The relatively few empirical studies comparing turnover intentions with actual turnover behaviour confirm the distinction (Marsh & Mannari, 1977; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Vandenberg and Nelson (1999) found the relationship between turnover intention and actual turnover behaviour varies widely, concluding that turnover intention is not always a precursor to quitting, which depends on alternative opportunities. Tang et al. (2000, p. 234) similarly found ‘withdrawal cognitions do not predict voluntary turnover’ and emphasized the need to study actual turnover behaviour. Noting that most individuals who express an intention to leave do not do so, Allen (2004) proposed *risk aversion*, *personality* and *volitional behaviour control* as possible explanations. Other reviews (e.g. Rubenstein et al., 2018) highlighted the distinction between turnover intention and actual turnover, and we undertook further analysis comparing studies on actual turnover and turnover intention.

The majority (76%) of turnover theories tested were built with actual turnover as the outcome variable, compared to 21% using turnover intentions. The turnover theory most often tested overall was job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001), accounting for 33% of studies overall, 24% of actual turnover studies and 67% of turnover intention studies. Mobley’s (1977) intermediate linkages model was the next most frequently tested, accounting for 21% of studies overall, 22% of actual turnover studies and 14% of turnover intention studies. The unfolding model of Lee and Mitchell (1994) accounted for 19% of studies overall, 22% of actual turnover studies and 5% of turnover intention studies. The prevalence of job embeddedness theory in studies of turnover intention is surprising given that this theory was developed to explain why employees stay with an organization. Intention to stay and intention to leave are not mirror constructs, and factors persuading employees to stay are different from those inducing them to quit, as attested by empirical evidence of asymmetry in reasons for staying and leaving (Clarke et al., 2010).

Turnover studies have overwhelmingly used quantitative methods: 95% overall, 93% of actual turnover studies and 98% of turnover intention studies. For actual turnover studies ( $n = 550$ ), 10% were cross-sectional and 51% used a static cohort design. For turnover intention studies ( $n = 665$ ), 86% were cross-sectional and 6% used a static cohort design. Cross-sectional studies ignore temporal effects, changes over time that trigger reconsideration of employment, but these have a strong influence on turnover. Also, for studies considering multiple organizational outcomes,

71% ( $n = 272$ ) focused on turnover intention, compared with 28% ( $n = 107$ ) using actual turnover.

There is a wider variety of methods employed for qualitative studies. In terms of data collection tools, in the period from 2001 studies of actual turnover have used external databases (10%) more than organizational records (6%), which were used more in earlier periods. In terms of time horizon, static cohort studies, representing 51% of actual turnover studies and 6% of turnover intention studies overall, have come to predominate since 1976. Ex-post archival studies have also increased over time, representing 22% of actual turnover studies and 1% of turnover intention studies overall. In terms of timeframe, the number of actual turnover studies with a timeframe of over a year has overtaken those completed within a year since 2001, which has not happened with studies of turnover intention. The dominant level of analysis overall has been the individual for 82% of actual turnover studies and 94% of turnover intention studies. Organization-level studies have increased, representing 16% of actual turnover studies and 5% of turnover intention studies overall. In parallel, greater attention has been paid to perspectives other than employees, but for the period 2001–2019, 37% of actual turnover studies considered only employees’ perspectives, whereas for turnover intention studies the corresponding figure is 82%. Looking at the number of dependent variables employed, turnover intention studies more often include multiple dependent variables (41%) compared to actual turnover studies (19%), suggesting that turnover intention is often included as one of several organizational outcomes. There has been increased focus on voluntary turnover, along with increased use of organizational records to substantiate this.

Further differences can be highlighted between articles using turnover intention and those using actual turnover. When turnover intention was the dependent variable, most variables were related to the person–context interface (29%), whereas for actual turnover, most variables were related to the organizational context (18%). Turnover intention is often used as a proxy for actual turnover, but this difference reinforces the conclusion of Purl et al. (2016) that turnover intention and actual turnover are predicted by different variables. This suggests that factors related to work context, such as embeddedness and network ties, could lead an individual to reconsider employment at the organization, but factors related to organizational context, such as structural changes, provoke actual quitting.

Empirical studies using turnover intention are most often located in Asia and North America, each with 33%, followed by Europe (23%). With respect to actual turnover studies, most (66%) were conducted in North America, followed by Europe (16%) and Asia (12%). In terms of sector focus over the whole period, turnover intention

studies tend to focus more on multiple sectors in a single study (43%) compared to actual turnover studies (29%). Manufacturing was the most studied sector for actual turnover (23%), whereas the service sector was most studied for turnover intention (21%). Healthcare was for both the next most studied sector: 20% for actual turnover and 18% for turnover intention. Turnover intention studies have increasingly included multiple sectors, whereas actual turnover studies have maintained a clearer sector focus. In terms of occupation, a relatively large proportion of studies include multiple occupations in a single study (70% for actual turnover and 79% for turnover intention). Studies on actual turnover focusing on a single occupation decreased from 15% in the period 1976–2000 to 11% in 2001–2019, whereas there was an increase in single-occupation studies for turnover intention in the corresponding periods, from 4% to 18%.

In terms of social science theory, while social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) has long been used to explain actual turnover, it has been used most extensively in turnover intention studies in the period 2001–2019. Overall, higher proportions of turnover intention studies are published in lower-category journals compared to studies on actual turnover. Finally, 35% of studies on turnover intention perceive turnover in negative terms, compared to 30% of studies on actual turnover.

## DISCUSSION

This review of turnover research is the most comprehensive to date, including 1375 articles from selected CABS-listed academic journals. Covering a range of literature, including empirical studies, conceptual articles, literature reviews, meta-analyses and methodological reviews, this review traces the development of ideas and the changing foci of research over the past century, highlighting major theoretical and methodological advances as well as emerging areas of empirical interest.

Early work was notably under-theorized, with the first turnover theory developed by March and Simon (1958). It was almost two decades before any new theory appeared, with two distinct parallel approaches developed by Mobley (1977) and Price (1977), the former concerned with process, the latter with content, or structure. It took almost as long again before the two strands were brought together by Lee and Mitchell (1994), since when the dominant paradigm has drawn extensively on these approaches. Despite the richness of theory development in the last two decades, there has been limited attention paid to testing specific turnover theory in empirical work, leaving the utility of most theory largely unconfirmed. Moreover, the predominance of quantitative approaches to investigating a com-

plex social phenomenon like turnover does not allow deep exploration of personal experiences.

The person–context interface has become more prevalent in turnover research, but more than one-third (36%) either did not specify the context or combined different contexts, which is a serious weakness because context has major implications for the role of predictors (Hom et al., 2020). Similarly, although 89% of empirical studies considered employee perspectives, studies of turnover comparing employees from different levels in the organizational hierarchy or from different occupational groups are rare (Trevor & Nyberg, 2008). The failure to differentiate occupations is surprising because turnover varies substantially between occupations, and motives for staying in an organization and staying in an occupation are different (Ng & Feldman, 2007). The general category ‘hospital employees’, for example, could include nurses, who may leave because of workload or insufficient supervisor support, and surgeons, whose main reason for leaving might be the opportunity to move to an institution with better research infrastructure. Studies that aggregate all employees, with no differentiation between occupations, are unlikely to be useful in developing action plans.

## Implications for advancing theory

There is scope for developing theory in several respects. In the first place, turnover as a theoretical construct should be elaborated in a more nuanced manner, distinguishing between different types of turnover rather than treating it as a homogeneous phenomenon. Theory development should be informed by such a differentiated approach. Building on typologies that distinguish between functional and dysfunctional turnover (Dalton, 1982) and between avoidable and unavoidable turnover (Abelson, 1987), these dimensions could be combined to create a matrix that would highlight avoidable, dysfunctional turnover as the priority for action. Filtering out unavoidable turnover (e.g. due to spouse relocation or illness) as well as functional turnover (irrespective of whether avoidable) would make turnover theory more useful. Another matrix comparing the strategic value to the organization with uniqueness (Lepak & Snell, 1999) would similarly focus attention on critical occupations of high value that are relatively rare, so difficult to replace. Constraints on mobility and degree of specificity of skills are pertinent (Campbell et al., 2012) in developing retention strategies focused on employee value (Cardy & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Factors affecting an individual’s intention to leave an organization can be distinguished from those affecting intention to change occupation (Li et al., 2019), suggesting a need to identify this small subset within the larger category of organizational

turnover and to consider occupational factors alongside labour market conditions.

Theory could be advanced by further integration of different theories. The unfolding model of Lee and Mitchell (1994) has been noted as significant for bringing together the previously separate strands of turnover theory started by Mobley (1977) and Price (1977). The integration of the unfolding model with job embeddedness theory by Holtom and Inderrieden (2006) can be seen as another critical advance. This review noted increasing use of general social science theories rather than specific turnover theories in turnover research, suggesting there are opportunities for further integrating theories from social science into a more comprehensive theory of turnover and retention (Mossholder et al., 2005).

Turnover has been studied by economists and sociologists, although to a much lesser extent than the disciplines included in this review. Insights from economics and sociology could be especially important in the context of the current pandemic and its aftermath. There is a wide range of social science theories that could contribute to explaining turnover and retention, and it is beyond the scope of this review to attempt to capture them all. However, there are encouraging signs of developments in this direction. Mossholder et al. (2005, p. 607) noted the paradox that ‘conceptual frameworks have cast turnover within the context of relational processes [but] ... not explicitly emphasized the effects of relational variables on turnover’. Jo and Ellingson (2019) explored such relational aspects of turnover, drawing on behavioural, structural and psychological aspects of social relationships that have potential to be integrated into turnover models. Social connections have obvious relevance and feature in job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001) and “‘forces” of attachment and withdrawal’ (Maertz & Campion, 2004, p. 569).

Another area needing attention is better conceptualization of turnover intention. Clearer specification is needed of moderators and mediators between turnover intention and actual turnover, including the role of risk, as suggested by Allen et al. (2007). As noted above, the justification for using turnover intention as an outcome variable is unconvincing, because antecedents to turnover intentions do not have the same relationship to actual turnover. Critically, as noted earlier, intention to stay and intention to leave are not mirror constructs, and retention is not the dual of turnover, but a framework incorporating intention to stay and intention to leave, as well as actual turnover and retention, would represent a significant breakthrough in theory. So too would the explicit incorporation of micro, meso and macro levels of analysis. As this review has revealed, most turnover theory is directed to the individual (micro) level, even if organizational (meso) and wider economic (macro) factors are mentioned. Tentative first steps in the direction

of a more holistic turnover theory, taking a strategically differentiated, multi-level, longitudinal approach, are presented in Figure 5.

At this stage, the differentiated model is little more than a heuristic device suggesting ways that a more comprehensive theory could be used to structure research and combine different elements. Starting with strategic differentiation, the idea is from the outset to explore turnover and retention for different groups according to value and scarcity, as well as dimensions like avoidability and functionality. The factors and antecedents are examples of what is likely to be relevant at the macro, meso and micro levels and are not intended to be comprehensive. What happens in the black box includes interactions of variables, moderation and mediation effects, conjecture over which is beyond the scope of this review. Crucially, the outcomes that need to be included in a holistic model are intentions, as stated at time  $t_1$ , and behaviours, at later time  $t_2$ ; those intentions and behaviours being to leave or to stay. Future research must address the relationship between intentions and behaviours and include the four possibilities of intention and behaviour in this respect. While much of turnover theory is predicated on the idea that individuals’ behaviours match their intentions, whether stayers or leavers, robust explanations are elusive for cases where behaviour is the opposite of stated intention. A starting point would be systematically to identify the proportions in the four categories. Finally, the impact of outcomes—those who do leave or do stay—can only be meaningfully assessed using a differentiated approach that identifies functional and dysfunctional, avoidable and unavoidable, turnover and retention.

## Implications for research methods

One challenge of working on actual turnover behaviour is the difficulty of accessing people who have left the organization, so turnover intention offers methodological expediency in data collection even if the theoretical justification is weak. Achieving an adequate sample size to permit statistical significance is also difficult when relatively few employees leave an organization voluntarily. A large sample of turnover intention data can be collected at once, whereas a longitudinal or retrospective approach necessary for studying actual turnover takes longer and is more difficult to organize. The conceptual problem of using turnover intention as a proxy for turnover behaviour, and the methodological difficulty of researching actual turnover, possibly explain the renewed interest in studying retention. However, retention is an entirely different construct from turnover. High retention does not indicate low turnover, since the ‘churn’ of employees may be

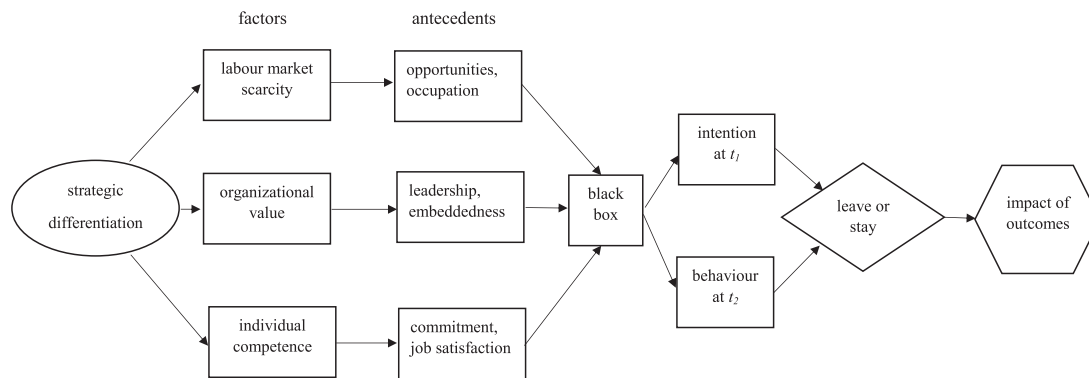


FIGURE 5 A differentiated model of turnover and retention

concentrated in one section of the workforce, and if those involved are of strategic importance and difficult to replace, the organization has a problem.

Despite its limitations, turnover intention is likely to become even more prominent over the next few years if unemployment associated with the COVID-19 pandemic reduces the likelihood of actual turnover and employees with turnover intentions stay because of the scarcity of alternative opportunities. The pandemic may exacerbate distance between turnover intention and actual turnover, but present opportunities to investigate reluctant stayers and reluctant leavers as discussed by Hom et al. (2012), thereby improving understanding of functional versus dysfunctional turnover (Dalton et al., 1981).

Methodological advance could address three areas: longitudinal studies, qualitative methods and multi-level analyses. The practical utility of cross-sectional turnover studies is limited, since they provide only a snapshot, and this review reveals that antecedents vary over time, which warrants a longitudinal approach. Longitudinal studies through, for example, regular saturation surveys—including the full range of antecedents—would be a useful way forward, as others have noted (Hom et al., 2017, 2020). Longitudinal study designs with multiple time intervals (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012) require deeper engagement with organizations to track turnover trends.

Echoing Allen et al. (2014), this review of methodological approaches shows increased use of highly sophisticated measurement and data analysis techniques in studying turnover. This sophistication was evident from early discussions on the use of survival analysis (Van der Merwe & Miller, 1971), to correcting turnover correlations (Williams & Peters, 1998) and increased use of model-testing techniques such as structural equation modelling and path analysis (Allen et al., 2014). However, such approaches focus on prediction and control rather than more nuanced understanding, and separate the employee from the employment context, thereby leaving

out important details of the ‘realities of the employment relation[ship]’ (Godard, 2014, p. 10).

Qualitative methodologies offer more scope for exploring individual motives and meanings through interviews, while focus groups can reveal team and unit-level issues affecting turnover. Ethnographic methods could provide new ways of uncovering nuanced reasons for leaving or staying in specific contexts.

Multi-level analyses (suggested by Holtom et al., 2008), involving individual, group and establishment studies, could advance understanding of contextual factors and issues that can be influenced by management. There is a bigger picture to labour turnover, but because psychologists have contributed disproportionately to its research, turnover studies are often abstracted from their wider context. The psychological focus has emphasized individuals at the micro level, where ‘it is easier to test parsimonious theories’ (Vincent et al., 2020, p. 473). This is consistent with general observations that in organizational behaviour and human resource management (HRM), psychological approaches have displaced approaches with a ‘more sociological and ethnographic orientation’ (Godard, 2014, p. 2). As Cullinane and Dundon (2006, p. 124) noted in relation to the psychological contract, this individualization ‘obscures rather than illuminates the fundamental questions surrounding the employment relationship’. The psychologization of turnover research has led to a ‘hollowing out’ of turnover as a concept, dissociating it from the wider political economy of the labour process in which such employment issues are embedded. Mobilizing theories and methods from economics and sociology in turnover research would facilitate a multi-level approach involving factors at workgroup, establishment and organization levels and their wider socioeconomic context. Increased emphasis on multi-level approaches in the broader organizational literature suggests such an approach could be fruitful for turnover research (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Moliterno & Ployhart, 2016).



That bigger picture suggests a need to move beyond psychological concerns of individual antecedents to consider more structural and systemic explanations for variations in turnover at establishment level. Recent theoretical advances in HRM, such as HR architecture (Lepak & Snell, 2002) and HR system strength (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016), could form the basis for such a reorientation of turnover theories towards the organizational level, rather than simply exploring how organizational factors moderate individual turnover behaviour. Such empirical research should involve case studies in which researchers conduct interviews with managers and focus groups with employees to explore different perceptions of drivers of turnover and retention (Gaio Santos & Martins, 2021; Hausknecht et al., 2009).

Some of the implications for practice of this review are outlined below, which also suggests ways further research could be made more relevant to organizations. This review has not directly addressed implications for policy, but by extension some of the issues highlighted are relevant for national and sector policy. Further research could explore the role of turnover and retention in national policies designed to promote post-pandemic economic recovery. Similarly, at sector level, further research is needed to explore how employment and training policies interact with turnover and retention of key occupational groups, such as hospital nurses. Research addressing national and sectoral policies would better advance theory and understanding by involving international comparisons, considering contextual differences in institutions and culture.

## Implications for practice

Literally hundreds of variables have been found to predict turnover, and the large range of factors influencing quit or stay decisions makes it difficult for organizations to develop retention strategies (Boxall et al., 2003). Purl et al. (2016), using the turnover events and shocks scale (Griffeth et al., 2008), found all 55 elements included in the study related to turnover intention, whereas only 13 related to actual turnover a year later. Thus, conclusions of studies using turnover intention as the only outcome variable may result in organizations wasting resources addressing issues that are irrelevant to actual turnover. These findings also suggest the need for further exploration of moderating and mediating variables between turnover intention and actual turnover.

Turnover theories validated empirically can provide conceptual underpinning for management interventions to address dysfunctional turnover and promote skill retention, as Hom et al. (2020) have argued. Linking turnover data with the results of regular workforce surveys could

illuminate differences between stayers and leavers and identify issues in areas where turnover is concentrated. Such insights could be used to develop appropriate turnover and retention strategies focusing on issues managers might expect to influence, such as HR systems and processes (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016).

To assess the impact of turnover, it is important to explore which individuals are leaving, their strategic importance to the organization, their relative performance and how easily they can be replaced, if indeed they need to be replaced (Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2013; Shaw et al., 2009). This would reveal the (dys)functionality of turnover, and provide insights into functional and dysfunctional retention, a concept that has received limited research attention to date. Dysfunctional retention is likely to be a problem in highly regulated labour markets, where it is costly for organizations to terminate underperforming employees. Empirical studies could be conducted to distinguish organizational practices that influence retention versus turnover, for example institutional voice (Croucher et al., 2011). Turnover research should be repositioned in the context of changing employment relationships and flexible careers that render loyalty and commitment largely redundant.

In developing practical guidance for managing turnover, Eberly et al. (2009) contrast four approaches to understanding turnover: focusing on who quits and why (content and process); how they leave (unfolding model); why some stay (job embeddedness); and management perspectives on functionality and avoidability. Context is key, especially in relation to relative skill levels and time to achieve competent performance. High labour turnover appears endemic to certain sectors and associated occupations, including hospitality (waiting staff), clothing manufacture (sewing machinists) and hospitals (nurses). However, the average training time for these three occupations is around 1 week, 6 weeks and 3 years, respectively, so the cost implications of turnover are quite different. If theory is to be useful for practice, it must incorporate contextual macro issues at the level of sectors and occupations.

Heterogeneous employee groups within an organization react differently to organizational initiatives (Cafferkey et al., 2020; Lepak & Snell, 1999, 2002; Wallace, 2009), which can affect turnover behaviour. Further empirical studies are needed on 'boomerang employees' (Shipp et al., 2014, p. 421) and the extent to which re-engagement can have positive organizational effects. Turnover and retention should be explored at a disaggregated level, considering the importance of different groups to the organization, using value/uniqueness after Lepak and Snell (2002).

The practical value of studying turnover at establishment and organization level is in identifying factors over which managers have more influence, including the ways

they manage. One study, exploring low-turnover firms in the high-turnover British clothing industry, demonstrated how managers can ‘pro-actively structure job embeddedness to deter turnover’ (Taplin & Winterton, 2007, p. 15), providing some endorsement for the conventional view that ‘employees leave their managers rather than their companies’ (Reina et al., 2018, p. 15). Management can influence turnover and retention by adopting, or failing to adopt, good practice in people management, which could prove far more important in practice than individual factors.

This review and analysis of labour turnover research has shown that, after a century of research, much remains to be explained. We hope that further work will advance understanding by deploying theories and methods from beyond the dominant paradigm, as well as empirical work in emerging economies that can illuminate the role of culture and context in the widest sense.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of the article at the publisher's website.

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