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PREVIEW

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**Turnover in the top organizational position: A sociological  
analysis**

**Anderson, Kenneth S., Ph.D.**

**The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1988**

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PREVIEW

TURNOVER IN THE TOP ORGANIZATIONAL POSITION:

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

by

Kenneth S. Anderson

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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Under the Supervision of Professor John B. Cullen

Lincoln, Nebraska

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A Sociological Analysis

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PREVIEW

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TURNOVER IN THE TOP ORGANIZATIONAL POSITION:

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Kenneth S. Anderson, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1988

Adviser: John B. Cullen

The major objective of this study was to examine turnover in the top organizational position from a sociological perspective. Data were collected on 133 Ph.D.-granting universities over a ten year period. Structural variables and resource scarcity variables, as well as changes in each, were examined for their impact on the probability of turnover in this position. Role theory provided the theoretical rationale for the hypothesized relationships. The findings contain very little support for the hypothesized relationships. A significant, positive relationship was found between structural differentiation and the probability of turnover in the position of university president. Furthermore, a significant, positive relationship was found between type of university control (public) and the probability of turnover. In addition to the relationships discussed above, an exploratory analysis of lag structures was also conducted in the current study. Results of this analysis revealed no one best lag model.



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PREVIEW

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### An Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between organizational level variables and the probability of turnover in the top organizational position. The current study is important for four reasons: (1) it addresses an important gap in the turnover literature; (2) the theoretical basis for the current study is a sociological paradigm, seldom used in turnover research and theory; (3) the design is longitudinal; and (4) the empirical analyses uses a relatively new statistical technique, event history analysis.

#### A Gap in the Turnover Literature

An important gap exists within the turnover literature. There is little knowledge of the antecedents of turnover in the top organizational position. Two bodies of literature examine turnover in organizations. These are the turnover literature and the executive succession literature. Within the turnover literature one can find research investigating both the antecedents and consequences of the turnover event. Yet, research in the turnover literature is not position or job specific (e.g., Price, 1977). Thus, there exists little knowledge

of the turnover process for specific positions, particularly the top organizational position. The second body of literature, studies of executive succession, is also attentive to turnover in organizations. This literature is concerned exclusively with the exiting of one position: the top executive's. Nevertheless, outside of the study of previous organizational performance on succession rates (e.g., Brown, 1982), this literature fails to consider the antecedents of individual turnover in the top organizational position. The important point is this: little research has examined the antecedents of turnover in the top organizational position.

This is a significant gap in the literature. Many authors have identified the top organizational position as the most powerful in the organization (e.g., Brady & Helmich, 1984). This position has an important impact on strategy, structure, the environment, and organizational performance (e.g., Dalton & Kesner, 1985). Duties associated with the top organizational position are numerous. Most are critical to the well-being of the organization. Turnover in this position can substantially handicap an organization (e.g., Staw, 1980). Given the importance of the top organizational position, the lack of knowledge relative to the antecedents of turnover is surprising. The current study addresses this problem directly.

## The Sociological Paradigm

This study is important for a second reason: The sociological paradigm was used as the conceptual framework. An assumption of most turnover studies is that the behavior in question (i.e., turnover) is primarily a function of individual characteristics. It is common for turnover studies to focus on psychological and/or individual antecedents (Worrell, Davidson III, Chandy, & Garrison, 1986). Unfortunately, most studies of this type only explain a small amount of the variance in turnover (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979). In an attempt to address the turnover question from a different perspective, the sociological paradigm was used. The fundamental proposition of the sociological paradigm is that characteristics of the collective (e.g., the organization) are important determinants of human attitudes, responses, and behaviors.

Emile Durkheim is among the most famous advocates of this perspective. It is a consistent theme throughout many of his works (Nisbet, 1965). For example, Durkheim (1951) used this approach in his analysis of suicide. Suicide, the most individual of all behaviors, is, according to Durkheim, a function of the characteristics of the collective: "[T]he relations of suicide to certain states of social environments are as direct and constant as its relations to facts of a biological and

physical character were seen to be uncertain and ambiguous" (1951:299). Durkheim's work on suicide is but one of many that emphasize the impact of the collective on individual behaviors and attitudes.

Based on the sociological paradigm, the current study's explanatory variables were drawn from the level of the collective: the organization. Many theorists have argued that the organization is a form of social collective (e.g., Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975; Weick, 1979). The choice of the organization as the level of analysis is supported by McCain, O'Reilly, and Pfeffer, who stated that turnover may be a function of "the system in which it occurs and, as such, may reflect something about the conditions of that system" (1983:627). Specifically, three sets of organizational level variables were examined: structural variables, resource scarcity variables, and contextual variables. Each set is discussed below.

**Organizational Structure.** The structuralist perspective has long been an important area in organizational theory. There are numerous dimensions, or characteristics, of structure. Among those considered most common are organizational size, administration size, and differentiation. According to Kimberly, structuralists have traditionally asked three questions: "What are the relationships among structural