

Temporal Research and Future Directions in Organizational Behavior

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Abstract

Currently, the vast majority of organizational behavior research adopts a static perspective, focusing on the overall average level of variables over a period of time while neglecting the role of time, such as the dynamic change characteristics of variables within that timeframe. By introducing the role of time and adopting a dynamic perspective to focus on the dynamic change characteristics of variables and explore their antecedents and outcomes, it may provide novel and breakthrough perspectives for existing research, thereby helping to expand traditional management theories. Given its importance for theoretical development, some recent studies have gradually begun to attend to the role of time and explore the dynamic change characteristics of variables from a dynamic perspective. However, overall, such research remains relatively scarce and dispersed across different research areas, and has not yet formed a structured system. Based on this, after categorizing relevant research into four categories according to two dimensions—the type of dynamic change characteristics of variables (trend vs. fluctuation) and the role of dynamic change characteristics of variables (independent variable vs. dependent variable)—we systematically review and organize the relevant research and clarify the theoretical mechanisms underlying these studies. Finally, based on the above analysis, future research could more comprehensively and systematically expand organizational behavior theory by focusing on variable fluctuation; examining the interactions among trend, fluctuation, and overall average level, among other approaches.

Full Text

Time-Related Research in Organizational Behavior and Future Directions

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Abstract: The vast majority of existing organizational behavior research adopts a static perspective, focusing on the overall average level of variables over time while neglecting the role of time itself, such as the dynamic change characteristics of variables over a period. By incorporating the role of time and examining the dynamic characteristics of variables and their antecedents and outcomes from a dynamic perspective, researchers may gain novel and groundbreaking insights that extend traditional management theories. Recognizing its importance for theoretical development, recent studies have begun to explore the role of time and investigate the dynamic characteristics of variables. However, such research remains relatively scarce and fragmented across different domains, failing to form a structured system. Building on this observation, we systematically review and organize relevant studies by classifying them into four categories based on two dimensions: (1) the type of dynamic characteristic (trend vs. variability) and (2) the role of the dynamic characteristic in the theoretical model (independent variable vs. dependent variable). We further clarify the theoretical mechanisms underlying these studies. Finally, based on this review, we propose that future research should pay greater attention to variability, examine interactions among trend, variability, and overall average levels, and more comprehensively and systematically expand organizational behavior theory.

Keywords: time; dynamic; organizational behavior; trend; variability

“Time can completely change the way theoretical constructs and their relationships are conceptualized, and consequently change the propositions derived from theory.”

—George & Jones (2000, p. 658)

1. Introduction

Time is a fundamental element of personal and work experience, ubiquitous in nature (Bluedorn, 2002). However, in the field of organizational behavior, most research adopts a static perspective, focusing on the overall average level of variables over time while ignoring the role of time and thus failing to examine the dynamic change characteristics of variables over time (Du Jing, 2013; Han Yi & Liao Jianqiao, 2005; Bluedorn, 2002; George & Jones, 2000). For example, numerous studies in the justice literature have examined how and when leader justice behavior influences employee attitudes and behaviors, but they focus exclusively on the impact of the overall average level of leader justice behavior over time (Li Chaoping & Shi Kan, 2002; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013). Relatively few studies investigate how dynamic characteristics of leader justice behavior—such as trends (e.g.,

becoming increasingly fair) or variability (e.g., being fair at some times and unfair at others)—affect employees (Colquitt et al., 2013; Qin, Ren, et al., 2018). Similar gaps exist in research examining how leader justice behavior influences changes in employee outcomes over time. This widely adopted static perspective, which neglects the role of time, has kept existing organizational behavior theories largely “static.”

Given its importance for theoretical development, recent studies have gradually begun to incorporate the role of time, exploring the dynamic characteristics that variables exhibit over time (e.g., trends, variability) and analyzing their antecedents and consequences (Ju et al., 2019; Matta et al., 2017; Matta et al., 2020; Qin, Huang, et al., 2018; Qin, Ren, et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2016). These studies demonstrate that incorporating dynamic characteristics of variables into theoretical models can enhance explanatory power beyond examining overall average levels (Chen et al., 2011; Hausknecht et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012). For instance, Matta et al. (2017) found that variability in leader justice behavior over time is not merely meaningless systematic measurement error but rather possesses unique theoretical significance distinct from the overall average level of justice behavior. Such variability provides additional explanatory power for employee work outcomes, with fluctuating justice behavior proving even more detrimental to employees than consistently unfair behavior.

In short, as George and Jones (2000) noted, “Time can completely change the way theoretical constructs and their relationships are conceptualized, and consequently change the propositions derived from theory” (p. 658). For example, when exploring a construct, incorporating individuals’ past experiences and future expectations into their current perceptions allows researchers to examine how temporal characteristics—past, present, and future—manifest within a construct and how they exert influence from a more systematic and “realistic” perspective (Hausknecht et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012; Ng et al., 2014; Qin, Huang, et al., 2018; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Thus, by incorporating the role of time, existing research can better “provide precise descriptions of the essence of phenomena from an ontological perspective” (George & Jones, 2000, p. 658).

However, existing research that incorporates the role of time and examines dynamic characteristics of variables remains relatively scarce and fragmented across different domains, preventing the formation of a structured system. This fragmentation hinders effective dialogue among studies and limits their utility as reference points for future research. To address this gap, this paper systematically reviews literature that incorporates the role of time and focuses on dynamic characteristics of variables, summarizing patterns of time usage in organizational behavior research to inspire future studies. Specifically, we first classify relevant research into four categories based on two dimensions: (1) the type of dynamic characteristic (trend vs. variability) and (2) the role of the dynamic characteristic in the theoretical model (independent variable vs. dependent variable). The four categories are: (1) trend as independent variable; (2) trend as dependent variable; (3) variability as independent variable; and (4)

variability as dependent variable. Building on this classification, we systematically review and organize relevant studies and clarify the theoretical mechanisms underlying them. Finally, based on this review, we provide valuable guidance and suggestions for future research.

2. Research Classification

This paper focuses on empirical studies in organizational behavior that incorporate the role of time and explore dynamic characteristics of variables. Because such research topics are dispersed (e.g., justice, leadership, employee socialization), we classify them for systematic review. First, although these empirical studies address diverse topics, they all fundamentally examine the dynamic characteristics of one or more variables over time. The vast majority of such research focuses on two types of dynamic characteristics: trend and variability (Bentein et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017). Therefore, we select the type of dynamic characteristic (trend vs. variability) as the first dimension of our classification. Specifically, trend reflects the direction of change in a variable over time (velocity; Hsee & Abelson, 1991), including growth and decay (McClellan et al., 2019), and is typically measured using slope in research (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2016). Variability reflects the (un)stability of a variable over time ((un)stability; Matta et al., 2017; Matta et al., 2020), typically measured using standard deviation (Fleeson, 2001; Matta et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2012). Second, across different studies, researchers can treat dynamic characteristics of variables either as independent variables to examine their effects on outcomes or as dependent variables to explore their antecedents. Therefore, we select the role of dynamic characteristics in the theoretical model (independent variable vs. dependent variable) as the second dimension of our classification.

In summary, this paper combines these two dimensions—the type of dynamic characteristic (trend vs. variability) and the role of the dynamic characteristic (independent variable vs. dependent variable)—to classify relevant studies into four categories (as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]): (1) trend as independent variable; (2) trend as dependent variable; (3) variability as independent variable; and (4) variability as dependent variable. Within each category, we further organize studies by research topic (see Table 1).

2.1 Trend as Independent Variable

Studies treating variable trends as independent variables examine how individuals evaluate, interpret, and judge their current experiences based on past experiences and other information, and how these evaluations subsequently influence attitudinal and behavioral reactions (Chen et al., 2011; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Unlike traditional research, individuals in these studies do not evaluate their current experiences as isolated information but rather connect them to past experiences, providing additional explanatory power for their attitudinal and behavioral reactions (Hausknecht et al., 2011; Li et al., 2017; Liu et al.,

2012). Current empirical research in this category primarily involves four topics: justice, leadership, employee attitudes and perceptions, and organizational context.

2.1.1 Justice Fortin (2008) proposed that “feelings of fairness at any given time are related to past experiences and present circumstances, and may influence expectations about future situations. However, the effect of time on fairness perceptions has not been adequately studied” (p. 111). Therefore, justice research would benefit from theoretical development that integrates temporal processes (Fortin, 2008; Jones & Skarlicki, 2013). In recent years, researchers have begun to examine the influence of individuals’ past justice perceptions. For example, Hausknecht et al. (2011) found that after controlling for current justice perceptions (at Time 4), employees’ justice trend (slope from Time 1 to Time 4) provided additional explanatory power for job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions: employees’ justice trend was positively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions. Furthermore, the trend of procedural justice had stronger effects on work outcomes than other justice dimensions (i.e., distributive, interpersonal, and informational justice). Similarly, Kim et al. (2015) found that after controlling for current justice perceptions (at Time 2), the justice trend (difference between Time 2 and Time 1) significantly explained variance in job satisfaction. Rubenstein et al. (2019) found that both distributive and procedural justice trends were positively related to workplace helping behavior; these trends also moderated the positive effects of distributive and procedural justice levels on helping behavior: the more pronounced the upward trend in distributive and procedural justice, the stronger the positive relationship between justice levels and helping behavior. Additionally, they examined interactions between different types of justice levels and trends (i.e., distributive justice level and procedural justice trend, procedural justice level and distributive justice trend) and found these interactions also significantly influenced workplace helping behavior.

2.1.2 Leadership In the leadership domain, Yu (2017) found that the trend of abusive supervision was negatively related to employee job performance and organizational citizenship behavior and positively related to deviant behavior. Drescher et al. (2014) found that the trend of shared leadership was positively related to the trend of team trust, which in turn positively influenced the trend of team performance. Ng et al. (2014) found that an upward trend in leader-member exchange weakened the positive relationship between psychological contract breach and aggressive voice behavior. Furthermore, the study found that an upward trend in coworker exchange not only weakened the positive relationship between psychological contract breach and aggressive voice but also weakened the negative relationship between psychological contract breach and constructive voice behavior.

2.1.3 Employee Attitudes and Perceptions Research on dynamic characteristics of employee attitudes and perceptions covers topics including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and others. Regarding job satisfaction, Liu et al. (2012) found that after controlling for average job satisfaction levels, its trend was negatively related to employee turnover behavior; the trend of overall team job satisfaction was also negatively related to team turnover rates. Moreover, when overall team job satisfaction showed a downward trend with low dispersion, the negative relationship between individual job satisfaction trend and turnover behavior was non-significant; when overall team job satisfaction showed an upward trend with low dispersion, the negative relationship between individual job satisfaction trend and turnover behavior was strongest. Chen et al. (2011) found that employee job satisfaction trend was negatively related to turnover intention trend, with work expectations partially mediating this relationship. Regarding organizational commitment, Bentein et al. (2005) found that more pronounced declines in affective and normative commitment were associated with more pronounced increases in turnover intentions and higher actual turnover rates.

In other areas, Peterson et al. (2011) found that employee psychological capital trend was positively related to trends in both supervisor-rated performance and objective performance. Johnson and Avolio (2019) found that when initial team psychological safety was high, the trend of team relationship conflict was negatively related to trends in employees' team identification and team satisfaction; these relationships were non-significant when initial team psychological safety was low. Ng and Feldman (2013) found that the trend of perceived supervisor embeddedness was positively related to the trend of employees' own embeddedness, with the trend of organizational trust mediating this relationship. Additionally, the trend of organizational trust was positively related to employees' own embeddedness trend and voice behavior.

Jokisaari and Nurmi (2009) found that newcomers' perceived supervisor support declined from 6 to 21 months after organizational entry. More pronounced declines in perceived supervisor support were associated with more pronounced declines in role clarity and job satisfaction and less pronounced increases in salary. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2017) found that the trend of newcomers' perceived organizational prestige was positively related to the trend of organizational identification, with the trend of psychological contract fulfillment mediating this relationship.

2.1.4 Organizational Context In the organizational context domain, Li et al. (2017) found that after controlling for the overall average level of job complexity, the trend of job complexity was positively related to employee job strain; for employees high in emotional stability, job autonomy weakened the positive relationship between job complexity trend and job strain, whereas for employees low in emotional stability, job autonomy did not weaken this relationship. Taylor et al. (2017) focused on the trend of workplace incivility. They

found that the trend of experienced workplace incivility indirectly influenced the trend of turnover cognition through the trend of burnout; employee conscientiousness strengthened the effect of workplace incivility trend on subsequent burnout trend.

2.2 Trend as Dependent Variable

Studies treating variable trends as dependent variables focus on examining the antecedents of change trends. Compared to research investigating how independent variables influence the overall average level of dependent variables, these studies focus more on which independent variables cause dependent variables to improve or deteriorate over time (i.e., trend; Kim et al., 2020; Ritter et al., 2016), helping us better understand the sources that influence variable change trajectories. Current empirical research in this category primarily involves four topics: justice, leadership, employee attitudes and perceptions, and organizational context.

2.2.1 Justice Konradt et al. (2016) explored how the Big Five personality traits influence individuals' justice perception trends during the hiring process. They found that individuals high in extraversion and agreeability were more likely to exhibit low decline trends (i.e., slight decreases in justice perceptions) rather than pessimistic growth trends (i.e., low initial perceptions with positive slope); individuals high in extraversion were also more likely to exhibit high decline trends (i.e., significant decreases) rather than pessimistic growth trends; individuals higher in conscientiousness were more likely to exhibit optimistic growth trends (i.e., high initial justice with positive slope) rather than pessimistic growth trends.

2.2.2 Leadership Regarding leader-member exchange, Nahrgang et al. (2009) found that within the same team, the quality of relationships between leaders and different members showed an upward trend over time before stabilizing; furthermore, member performance was positively related to the trend of leader-rated leader-member exchange quality, and leader performance was positively related to the trend of member-rated leader-member exchange quality. Miscenko et al. (2017) found that leader identity change followed a J-shaped curve, declining initially before increasing substantially later; furthermore, the trend of leaders' self-perceived initiating structure leadership ability was negatively related to subsequent leader identity trend.

2.2.3 Employee Attitudes and Perceptions Research on dynamic characteristics of employee attitudes and perceptions covers topics including job satisfaction, burnout, and efficacy. Regarding job satisfaction, Boswell et al. (2009) found that newcomers who were dissatisfied with previous jobs and had more positive experiences in new jobs (e.g., better promise fulfillment and higher socialization) were most likely to exhibit a pattern of job satisfaction that peaked

after organizational entry and subsequently declined. Ritter et al. (2016) found that employees' prior job satisfaction levels were negatively related to subsequent job satisfaction trends; that is, higher prior satisfaction was associated with declining trends, while lower prior satisfaction was associated with improving trends. Kim et al. (2020) found that trends in job satisfaction and affective commitment were positively related to trends in person-job fit.

Regarding burnout, Dunford et al. (2012) found that employees undergoing different types of career transitions exhibited different burnout trajectories. Specifically, organizational newcomers and internal job changers (i.e., promotions or lateral moves) experienced slight increases in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization during their first year in new positions, stabilizing in the second year. In contrast, internal employees (i.e., incumbents) showed relatively stable burnout, with only slight decreases over time. Relatedly, regarding recovery, Hülshager et al. (2014) examined the role of mindfulness in work recovery, finding that for individuals low in mindfulness, psychological detachment showed an upward trend during the workweek, whereas for those high in mindfulness, no systematic changes occurred.

Regarding efficacy, Ng and Lucianetti (2016) found that the trend of perceived respect was positively related to trends in creative self-efficacy, persuasion self-efficacy, and change self-efficacy; the trend of organizational trust was positively related to trends in persuasion and change self-efficacy. Additionally, trends in these three types of self-efficacy were positively related to trends in idea generation, dissemination, and implementation, respectively. Relatedly, in examining expatriate work adjustment, Zhu et al. (2016) found that expatriates' work adjustment typically showed an upward trend; the initial level (intercept) of work adjustment was negatively related to the steepness of the adjustment trend (slope); prior cultural and relevant work experience was negatively related to the steepness of the adjustment trend; and expatriates' core self-evaluation was positively related to the steepness of the adjustment trend.

2.2.4 Organizational Context Tremblay et al. (2018) examined how initiating structure and consideration leadership influence trends in team-level distributive and procedural justice climate and trends in team-level extra-role behavior. Results showed that consideration leadership was positively related to trends in both justice climates; initiating structure leadership showed an inverted-U relationship with procedural justice climate trend, where low initiating structure led to declining procedural justice climate, while moderate initiating structure led to improving procedural justice climate. Additionally, under high initiating structure, team-level extra-role behavior showed an upward trend over time, whereas under high consideration, team-level extra-role behavior declined over time.

2.3 Variability as Independent Variable

Studies treating variability in variables over time as independent variables examine the explanatory power of variability beyond overall average levels. These studies consider both overall average levels and variability together, providing additional explanatory power for individual attitudes and behaviors (Matta et al., 2017; Matta et al., 2020). Current empirical research in this category primarily involves three topics: justice, emotional labor, and leadership.

2.3.1 Justice Matta et al. (2017) introduced the concept of justice variability to describe fluctuations or instability in leader justice behavior over time. Contrary to the intuitive view that “justice is always better,” their study demonstrated that for employees, leaders who are sometimes fair and sometimes unfair (high justice variability) have more detrimental effects than consistently unfair leaders. Variability in leader justice behavior creates greater employee stress, indirectly leading to lower job satisfaction and higher emotional exhaustion. Building on this work, Matta et al. (2020) further proposed that justice variability counteracts the benefits of average interpersonal justice: while interpersonal justice positively influences autonomous cooperative behavior through group pride, high interpersonal justice variability weakens this positive effect. Qin, Ren, et al. (2018) also found that variability in leader justice behavior explained additional variance in subordinates’ overall justice perceptions.

2.3.2 Emotional Labor Scott et al. (2012) introduced the concept of emotional labor variability, describing fluctuations or instability in surface acting and deep acting over time. They found that employees with greater variability in surface acting exhibited lower job satisfaction and higher work withdrawal; variability in deep acting was not significantly related to job satisfaction or work withdrawal.

2.3.3 Leadership Yu (2017) introduced abusive supervision variability to describe fluctuations or instability in abusive supervision over time. The study found that abusive supervision variability creates greater uncertainty for employees, consuming cognitive resources and triggering anxiety, thereby reducing job performance and organizational citizenship behavior while increasing deviant behavior. This research demonstrates that, holding average levels of abusive supervision constant, variability in abusive supervision across time or leaders has more detrimental effects on subordinates than stable abusive supervision.

2.4 Variability as Dependent Variable

Studies treating variability in variables over time as dependent variables examine the antecedents of variability. Compared to traditional research focusing on antecedents of overall average levels, these studies seek to explain what causes variability in dependent variables and whether stable individual differences exist in such variability (Matta et al., 2017; Qin, Ren, et al., 2018). Current empirical

research in this category primarily involves two topics: justice and emotional labor.

2.4.1 Justice As noted earlier, Matta et al. (2017) introduced the concept of justice variability and further examined its antecedents. They found that leaders' self-control was negatively related to justice variability, indicating that variability in leader justice behavior reflects relatively stable individual (leader) differences. Additionally, Qin, Ren, et al. (2018) proposed that leaders' motives for justice behavior can be categorized as instrumental motives vs. value-expressive motives. When leaders' instrumental motives are low, their value-expressive motives strengthen the positive relationship between justice behavior and its variability. Furthermore, Herr et al. (2015) examined organizational justice as a predictor of heart rate variability (i.e., variation in heartbeat speed) as a dependent variable. They found that interactional and procedural justice were significantly negatively related to white-collar workers' heart rate variability but unrelated to blue-collar workers' heart rate variability.

2.4.2 Emotional Labor As noted earlier, Scott et al. (2012) introduced the concept of emotional labor variability. In addition to examining it as an independent variable, they also investigated its antecedents. Specifically, they found that employees' self-monitoring level was positively related to both the average level and variability of surface acting, but unrelated to both the average level and variability of deep acting.

3. Theoretical Mechanisms

Building on the preceding review, we further distill the theoretical mechanisms underlying research that incorporates the role of time. It is worth noting that because relevant research topics are dispersed and involve numerous theories, and given that our focus is on the application of time in organizational behavior research and future directions, this paper primarily summarizes time-related theories that address dynamic characteristics of variables over time (i.e., trend, variability). We maintain the classification from the previous section, organizing commonly used theoretical mechanisms across the four categories based on the two dimensions of dynamic characteristic type (trend vs. variability) and role (independent vs. dependent variable) (see Table 2).

3.1.1 Gestalt Characteristics Theory

Gestalt characteristics theory (Ariely & Carmon, 2000; Varey & Kahneman, 1992) posits that when individuals construct experiences or summarize discrete experiences, they do not simply average all experiences but rather use salient features to construct summary evaluations and descriptions. Specifically, due to cognitive limitations, people tend to extract two Gestalt features from experience profiles: static features reflecting specific time points (e.g., peak or end states) and dynamic features reflecting changes as experiences progress (e.g.,

trend) (Li et al., 2017). For instance, end state and trend information are two extremely salient Gestalt features that individuals often reference to construct unique experience profiles (Ariely & Carmon, 2000; Reb & Cropanzano, 2007). These Gestalt features provide clues about future possible states, enabling individuals to infer whether to repeat similar experiences and respond accordingly.

Thus, when trend serves as an independent variable, this salient Gestalt information influences subsequent reactions. Consequently, Gestalt characteristics theory is widely used in research where trend is the independent variable. For example, based on this theory, Hausknecht et al. (2011) found that after controlling for current justice perceptions, employees' justice trend provided additional explanatory power for job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. In short, when individuals use justice perceptions to determine their future reactions, these changing perceptions over time (i.e., feeling increasingly fair or unfair) represent Gestalt characteristics (Hausknecht et al., 2011). Similarly, when examining the effects of abusive supervision, Yu (2017) found based on Gestalt characteristics theory that employees use trends in abusive supervision they experienced over time to describe the past and anticipate the future, uniquely shaping their job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and deviant behavior in ways that static perspectives (i.e., considering only overall averages) cannot capture.

3.1.2 Conservation of Resource Theory

Conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2003) posits that individuals constantly strive to protect existing resources and acquire new ones. When facing actual or potential resource loss, individuals experience discomfort and stress and respond accordingly. Resources are defined as "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies valued by individuals, or means to obtain them" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). Because these resources vary across individuals and within individuals over time (Qin et al., 2014), conservation of resource theory is inherently dynamic (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2017).

Based on this theory, because resource changes are dynamic, resulting stress generation is also dynamic. Consequently, an increasing number of studies adopt a resource conservation perspective to understand dynamic processes of stress generation and coping in work environments (Taylor et al., 2017). For example, declining job satisfaction over time creates stress for employees. Based on conservation of resource theory, individuals motivated to protect key resources respond to declining job satisfaction trends by, for instance, increasing turnover intentions (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012).

3.1.3 Prospect Theory

Prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984) is primarily used to explain individual decision-making under uncertainty. The theory posits that how individuals make decisions in uncertain environments depends largely on whether

they adopt a gain frame or loss frame. Specifically, individuals tend to take risk-averse actions in gain frames and high-risk actions in loss frames. Whether individuals adopt a gain or loss frame depends on their reference frame and subjective value function. The reference frame reflects the internal standard (i.e., reference point) individuals use to evaluate current states, while the subjective value function reflects the difference between the current state and the reference point (gains are positive, losses are negative), with more distant gains or losses having greater impact (Chen et al., 2011).

Thus, the reference frame and subjective value function in prospect theory are closely related to information provided by variable trends over time, making prospect theory widely applied in research where trend is the independent variable. Based on prospect theory, Chen et al. (2011) argued that even the same level of job satisfaction may have different subjective meanings for different employees depending on whether their satisfaction at that time point has increased or decreased compared to before. The study found that employee job satisfaction trend influenced turnover intention trend. Specifically, when individuals' subjective experiences in a task become worse (or improve), their intention to re-engage decreases (or increases) (Kahneman, 1999; Kahneman et al., 1993). Therefore, when employees' job satisfaction shows a declining trend, their turnover intentions show an increasing trend.

3.2.1 Conservation of Resource Theory

Conservation of resource theory is also applied in research where trend serves as the dependent variable. Based on this theory, individuals are motivated to protect key resources (Chen et al., 2011; Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2003), with burnout widely recognized as a typical stress outcome. Taylor et al. (2017) examined how an upward trend in workplace incivility experienced by employees leads to an upward trend in burnout, which subsequently changes turnover cognition. An upward trend in turnover cognition indicates that individuals are replenishing psychological and social resources needed to cope with stressors, suggesting they may reconsider the necessity of job changes to avoid future incivility (Porath & Pearson, 2013).

3.2.2 Reconstruction Memory Theory

Reconstruction memory theory (Lilly et al., 2010; Sitton & Griffin, 1980) posits that people alter their perceptions of previous events based on information received after the events, thereby changing their behavior. Over time, individuals or teams may experience a series of positive and negative events that can reshape their views of previous events.

Thus, reconstruction memory theory can be applied in time-sensitive research to explain dynamic characteristics of dependent variables. For example, because justice perceptions change over time, Tremblay et al. (2018) argued that such changes cause frequent "reconstructions" of employee memories (Lilly et al.,

2010), altering employees' motivation to reciprocate fair treatment and consequently influencing their extra-role behaviors.

3.2.3 Adaptation Theory

Adaptation theory (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) posits that when people have emotional reactions to life events, a process similar to sensory adaptation occurs. Although people may have immediate reactions to positive or negative events (e.g., temporary increases or decreases in happiness), they typically adapt quickly, with happiness returning to pre-event or baseline levels (Brickman & Campbell, 1971).

Thus, applying adaptation theory to time-sensitive research helps explain how absolute levels of variables (independent variables) influence their subsequent trends (dependent variables). Based on adaptation theory, Ritter et al. (2016) argued that if employees' prior job satisfaction levels were high, subsequent satisfaction would be more likely to show a declining trend; conversely, if prior satisfaction levels were low, subsequent satisfaction would be more likely to show an improving trend.

3.3.1 Uncertainty Management Theory

Uncertainty management theory (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) posits that employees desire to feel certain about their world and their place in it. When individuals feel uncertain, they experience stress. In this theory, "uncertainty" is broadly defined, arising when individuals cannot predict the future or when inconsistencies exist among cognitions, experiences, and behaviors (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002).

Behavioral variability over time is an important source of uncertainty perception, making uncertainty management theory widely used in research where variability serves as the independent variable to explain stress resulting from variability. Based on this theory, Matta et al. (2017) proposed that justice variability creates uncertainty for employees, such that leaders who are sometimes fair and sometimes unfair cause more stress for subordinates than consistently unfair leaders. Additionally, Matta et al. (2020) argued that individuals hope to use interpersonal justice to manage risks related to group social identity and state-related uncertainty, but if interpersonal justice itself is uncertain (i.e., highly variable), the benefits of average interpersonal justice are diminished. If justice perceptions are variable, they themselves embody uncertainty and cannot help individuals manage external uncertainty—they merely exchange one uncertainty for another (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002).

3.4.1 Moral Self-Regulation Theory

Moral self-regulation theory (Bandura, 1991) posits that a key mechanism triggering unethical behavior is whether actors can justify the behavior. Qin, Ren, et al. (2018) argued that leaders' motives for justice behavior (instrumental

vs. value-expressive) may influence their justification for unfair behavior, thereby affecting both average justice behavior levels and consistency in justice behavior. For example, when leaders have high value-expressive motives, which are associated with high moral standards, they find it difficult to justify unfair behavior across different temporal contexts, thus reducing variability in their justice behavior.

3.4.2 Affect Variability Theory

Affect variability theory (Fleeson, 2001; Larsen, 1987; Penner et al., 1994) posits that people have different, relatively stable patterns of affect variability over time—that is, stable individual differences exist in affect variability. This view is similar to personality theory’s (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) proposition that individual differences in personality traits lead to differences in affect variability. Based on affect variability theory, Scott et al. (2012) examined the potential influence of self-monitoring—a relatively stable individual trait—on emotional labor variability. They found that employees’ self-monitoring was positively related to variability in surface acting; furthermore, when self-monitoring was high, the effects of surface acting variability on job satisfaction and work withdrawal were weaker.

4. Research Summary and Future Directions

Our literature review reveals that research incorporating the role of time has achieved meaningful results. However, such research remains fragmented and lacks systematic integration, suffering from three main limitations. First, existing research focuses more on “trend” than “variability” in dynamic characteristics, resulting in a serious imbalance in research volume. Second, most studies examine only one category of dynamic characteristics, ignoring connections or interactions among different categories. Third, research has focused exclusively on trend and variability, largely neglecting other dynamic characteristics. Additionally, existing research is lacking in indigenous and cross-cultural studies and in studies examining effects on actors themselves. Therefore, based on our review, we propose several urgent future research directions to provide valuable inspiration for studies exploring dynamic characteristics of variables.

4.1 Focus on Variability of Variables

Our classification review reveals that existing research focuses primarily on trend while paying less attention to variability. In fact, examining variability may provide additional explanatory power beyond average levels and trends. For example, the same upward trend may have different effects when it represents stable improvement versus “rollercoaster” fluctuating improvement. Therefore, future research should expand investigations of variability. Currently, such research is largely limited to leader justice behavior; future studies could examine variability in other leadership behaviors and their antecedents and consequences. For

instance, previous research indicates that abusive supervision fluctuates daily, influenced by various situational factors and potentially having important effects on employees (Li Aimei et al., 2013; Barnes et al., 2015; Courtright et al., 2016). Drawing on Matta et al.'s (2017) work on justice variability, we can speculate that variability in abusive supervision may also create substantial uncertainty for employees (Yu, 2017), thereby increasing psychological stress and turnover intentions.

4.2 Examine Interactions Among Trend, Variability, and Overall Average Levels

Trend and variability are two important dynamic characteristics describing how variables change over time; existing literature typically examines only one aspect. To more comprehensively and accurately investigate variable changes and their effects, future research should consider interactions among trend, variability, and average levels. First, future studies could examine interactions between dynamic characteristics and overall average levels. Most existing research controls for overall average levels when examining dynamic characteristics (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012) but rarely analyzes interactions between dynamic characteristics and average levels. Using Matta et al.'s (2020) study as an example, high variability in interpersonal justice weakened the positive effects of average interpersonal justice. Thus, variability and average levels in interpersonal justice interact to influence individuals rather than having simple independent effects. Second, researchers could analyze interactions among dynamic characteristics themselves (e.g., trend and variability) and even three-way interactions with average levels. The effect of trend on outcomes may differ depending on variability levels. In summary, examining these interactions can help us more comprehensively understand dynamic relationships among variables.

4.3 Focus on Other Important Dynamic Characteristics Such as Timing and Duration

Existing research primarily focuses on overall changes over time, including trend and variability. However, other change characteristics are also crucial, such as when changes occur, their duration, and their peaks and troughs. The timing of dynamic changes in leader behavior—whether occurring when employees first join or after longer tenure—may have different effects. Based on sensemaking theory, employees reference leaders' past behavioral changes to form reasonable expectations about current leader behavior (Liu et al., 2012). Senior employees have longer reference periods, making variable leader behavior appear more patterned to them and resulting in stronger psychological adaptation and less negative impact. Conversely, if changes occur when employees first join, they experience greater psychological maladaptation, leading to more negative cognitive or behavioral outcomes. Furthermore, future research should pay more attention to nodes where change peaks and troughs occur, as everyone has acceptable peaks and bottom lines, and the negative effects of highly variable

changes may result from exceeding intolerable ranges. Additionally, the duration of changes warrants investigation. For example, leader behavior may have different effects on leaders themselves across different time windows (Qin et al., 2019; Qin, Huang, et al., 2018). Therefore, incorporating change duration can provide more effective guidance for management practice.

4.4 Strengthen Indigenous and Cross-Cultural Comparative Research

Most existing research is based on Western samples. Due to different cultural and value backgrounds, results in indigenous contexts may differ from those in Western contexts, making it necessary to develop more Chinese-characteristic indigenous research (Wang Hui & Zhang Cuilian, 2012; Au et al., 2017). For example, collectivism is an important characteristic of Chinese society (Li Rui et al., 2012; Connection, 1987). Employees influenced by collectivist culture have stronger attachment desires to their collective (Yang Shuai et al., 2012; Brewer & Chen, 2007; Earley, 1993), so they may experience fewer negative effects and have lower turnover intentions than non-collectivist employees when facing the same changes. Similarly, future research should expand cross-cultural comparative studies across different cultural characteristics. Taking uncertainty avoidance as an example, individuals in countries/regions or groups with strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance may have vastly different internal feelings and behavioral manifestations when experiencing the same degree of change. For instance, when leader behavior is variable, individuals from strong uncertainty avoidance cultures may experience more stress than those from weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, resulting in higher turnover intentions or more negative behaviors. The influence of these different cultural characteristics on time-sensitive dynamic research remains to be explored.

4.5 Explore Effects of Dynamic Characteristics on Actors Themselves

Existing research primarily examines effects from the recipient's perspective. However, behavior enactment affects not only recipients but also actors themselves (Kang Yongjun & Peng Jian, 2019; Lin et al., 2016). Integrating temporal dynamic perspectives with actor perspectives represents an important future direction for research on dynamic characteristics of variables. For example, while many studies examine how trends or variability in leader justice behavior affect employees, virtually no research has investigated how these dynamic characteristics affect leaders themselves. Previous research confirms that leader justice behavior entails costs for leaders, such as resource depletion and emotional exhaustion, which often reduce leader organizational citizenship behavior (Johnson et al., 2014; Patient, 2011). Examining how trends or variability in leader justice behavior affect leaders themselves can provide richer insights into this dynamic process. Similarly, from the employee perspective, investigating how dynamic characteristics of employee behavior affect employees themselves represents another worthwhile direction.

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