

**COMMENTARY**

# Integrating diverse careers perspectives in boomerang mobility research

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent research on boomerang mobility has explored factors influencing individuals' decisions to engage in boomerang transitions, that is, returning to a previous employer, and the outcomes of these transitions. However, as outlined in our review and conceptual model (Dlouhy et al., 2025), this research area is complex and primarily focused on organizational outcomes, overlooking central individual-level career perspectives.

We truly appreciate the insightful responses from two outstanding author teams (De Vos & Sullivan, 2025; Makarius et al., 2025) to our article. Expanding on our three opportunities for future scholarship, Makarius et al. (2025) presented a comprehensive set of further research directions that will enrich our understanding of the boomerang mobility process—both from the perspectives of organizational career management and individual career agency. De Vos and Sullivan (2025) further offered an analysis of the boomerang mobility process through three career theories: the kaleidoscope career model, career inaction theory, and sustainable career theory. They provide a rich set of research recommendations to facilitate their alignment with our conceptual model, informing future scholarship on boomerang mobility.

We welcome the opportunity to offer our reflections on these authors' responses to our article. We address three key takeaways from these excellent commentaries: the need for (1) further conceptual clarification of boomerang transitions and mobility, (2) the adoption of a holistic approach that integrates a diversity of career theories, and (3) a focus on the importance of social relationships in understanding boomerang transition decisions and outcomes.

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## CLARIFYING THE BOOMERANG MOBILITY CONCEPT

We agree with Makarius et al. (2025) that achieving conceptual clarity is essential for understanding boomerang mobility. To clarify our positioning, first, we argue that, beyond time spent in an interim organization, the key characteristic of boomerang employment is *the need for a prior formal exit of an Organization A*—marked, for example, by a definitive end date of employment or by contract termination—for a later return under a new contract. Notably, career transitions involving self-employment (Snyder et al., 2021), volunteering, or other pursuits where individuals fully sever ties with Organization A and thus have an exit transition, meet the criteria for boomerang transitions. In contrast, according to our definition, family leaves or sabbaticals do not constitute boomerang mobility when the employment relationship with the original organization remains intact during the leave. Situations like post-retirement bridge employment (Shipp et al., 2014), hiring a former intern (e.g., Ali & Swart, 2024), or extended research visits (Swider et al., 2017) may be more in a gray zone. These would be considered boomerang transitions only when workers' rights and status as insiders have been formally lost before a possible return.

Second, we consider the formal termination of employment with Organization A to be more critical in defining boomerang mobility than the specific nature of activities undertaken in the interim. We agree with Makarius et al. (2025) that “*Organization B*” *does not necessarily need to be an actual organization but may also be another work or nonwork destination* (i.e., a transition into and out of the labor force; Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2022). Alternative work destinations include—in agreement with Makarius et al. (2025)—gig work, contract work, and other types of work. In cases where an individual is active in the nonwork domain instead of “Organization B” (e.g., when someone formally leaves their organization for parental or care duties), the distal and proximal factors and the psychological mechanisms currently associated with Organization B in our model will differ. In these cases, other literature, such as work-life shock events (Crawford et al., 2019) and nonwork orientations (Hall et al., 2013), might better inform such mechanisms. In sum, to decide whether a situation may be classified as a boomerang transition, the answer to the question “Did the employee ever formally leave the organization before returning?” should be a *yes*.

## BROADENING PERSPECTIVES ON BOOMERANG MOBILITY BY INTEGRATING DIVERSE CAREER THEORIES

Boomerang mobility can be understood through various theoretical lenses beyond the perspective of conservation of resources (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2022), which we used for our conceptual model. A central question in both commentaries relates to how individuals evaluate distal and proximal push and pull factors when deciding whether to make a boomerang transition.

First, from the perspective of *career inaction theory*, we agree with De Vos and Sullivan (2025) that the boomerang decision might not always involve a rational weighing of gains versus losses. Irrationality may influence, for example, the proposed “looking backward” mechanism in our conceptual model, where factors at the individual or contextual level could bias memories of Organization A. We also acknowledge the need for research on internal inertial forces. While a boomerang transition may seem like a more passive career choice compared to transitioning to a new organization, it is crucial to account for the role of individuals' career agency. Returning employees are not merely reacting to reduced uncertainty, nor are they

“pulled back” into Organization A. They are actively shaping their return during the reintegration process. This raises further questions about the extent and nature of the agency boomerangs exert in navigating their return and how these actions influence their subsequent performance (Makarius et al., 2025). Examining how career agency and inertial forces may interact in boomerang mobility processes could, therefore, offer further insights into this process.

Second, a particularly intriguing proposition by De Vos and Sullivan (2025) regarding the *kaleidoscope career model* is examining career priorities shifting across the lifespan, which might explain whether boomerang transitions are more likely during early, mid, or late career stages. Lifespan theories may be helpful here (for a review, see Zacher & Froidevaux, 2021). For instance, *socioemotional selectivity theory* (SST; see Carstensen, 2021, for a review) suggests that as they age, workers perceive their future time perspective as more limited and, as such, favor high-quality relationships and emotional goals rather than instrumental goals. Hence, proximal antecedents from Organizations A and B of a relational nature (e.g., perceived organizational support, culture, managers' leadership styles, and the absence of interpersonal conflicts) may be particularly important for older workers considering a boomerang transition. Returning to the kaleidoscope career model, SST would predict greater importance of the balance priority at older ages and of challenge in younger ages. Hence, for younger workers, key proximal antecedents at both organizations may relate to opportunities for career advancement or performance management systems.

Third, *identity persistence*, as Makarius et al. (2025) suggested, represents another crucial factor in boomerang mobility. Individuals might return to organizations they worked for early in their careers, suggesting that career identity is shaped through these moves. In line with *social identity theory* (Tajfel, 1978), at the individual level, employees may have continued to identify with their past membership in Organization A. Alternatively, as part of phase (b) of our model, employees may engage in *identity work* (i.e., cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral activities with the goal of repairing, strengthening or weakening their work-related identities associated with Organizations A and B; Caza et al., 2018). At the organizational level, an important factor for decision-making may be Organization A's and B's engagement in *identity work support*, that is, the action of “encouraging, allowing, or providing opportunities to think about, talk about, or display aspects of work and nonwork identities, or engaging in activities that foster understanding and sharing of identities” (Jean et al., 2024, p. 1287); given its positive associations with employees' affective organizational commitment and organizational identification.

Fourth, we agree with De Vos and Sullivan (2025) that *sustainable career theory* (De Vos et al., 2020) broadens boomerang mobility research by integrating individual and organizational perspectives. Its focus on personal agency, contextual factors, and the balance of happiness, health, and productivity provides a nuanced view, supporting a whole-career perspective and offering valuable directions for future research. As such, we agree that it could be a valuable theoretical lens to reconcile the existing organizational (HRM) and individual (psychology) perspectives on boomerang mobility in future research.

## EXAMINING SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE BOOMERANG MOBILITY PROCESS

Both commentaries emphasized that social relations are a critical aspect of boomerang mobility. In particular, we agree that a focus on relationships *inside* the workplace and colleagues'

reactions after re-entry to Organization A will be especially important in explaining boomerang transition outcomes—which has been emphasized in recently published work (Grohsjean et al., 2024; Wang & Cotton, 2025). Notably, the finding that incumbent employees in Organization A are not more helpful to boomerangs than new hires (Grohsjean et al., 2024) may stem from factors like perceived disloyalty, especially if boomerangs return to higher positions (Arnold et al., 2021). In such cases, incumbent employees may reduce organizational citizenship behaviors in response. Further, relationships *outside* the workplace provide support and stability, and future research should examine how both work-related and nonwork social relations interact in shaping the boomerang mobility process. We concur with De Vos and Sullivan (2025) that examining the influence of individuals' nonwork life factors on making a boomerang transition, for example, within the framework of sustainable careers, will generate valuable insights.

## CONCLUSION

By synthesizing the insightful perspectives provided by the commentators (De Vos & Sullivan, 2025; Makarius et al., 2025) in response to our conceptual model of boomerang mobility (Dlouhy et al., 2025), we highlight key areas for advancing knowledge within this field, including organizational career management strategies and social relations encompassing both work and nonwork aspects of life. We look forward to the development of future research benefiting from the diverse perspectives presented in our lead article and the follow-up commentaries, which will further enrich our theoretical and empirical understanding of boomerang mobility.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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