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**Does coworkers' upward mobility affect employees' turnover intention?
The roles of perceived employability and prior job similarity**

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What would employees do if their coworkers move upwardly to other organizations? In the era of boundaryless career, voluntary turnover is more prevalent than ever before. Effects of coworkers' voluntary turnover on employees' turnover are attracting attention in human resource management. However, this stream of research has generated mixed findings showing both positive and negative effects on focal employees' turnover, and scholars still know little about the specific mechanism through which the effects occur. This study takes the first step to reconcile the mixed findings and unfold the black box of the effects. Specifically, we argue that the mobility direction of coworkers' turnover should not be overlooked by previous research, and we propose that coworkers' upward mobility plays an indispensable role in predicting employees' turnover intention. Based on social comparison theory, we hypothesize that coworkers' upward mobility positively relates to focal employees' turnover intention through focal employees' perception of employability. Furthermore, we propose prior job similarity as a contingency that activates the relationship mentioned above, such that the mediation effect is stronger with higher prior job similarity. Our hypotheses were tested and fully supported by two-wave data from a sample of 369 employees in China. Lastly, theoretical and practical implications are discussed along with possible limitations and directions for future turnover research.

Keywords: social comparison; upward mobility; perceived employability; prior job similarity; turnover intention

Introduction

Nowadays, job change becomes more and more frequent in the era of boundaryless career (Sammarra, Profili, & Innocenti, 2013). Voluntary turnover within organizations is more prevalent than ever before, and its influences on organizational outcomes are strongly acknowledged. Early studies in turnover mainly treat employees' departures individually and independently (Call, Nyberg, Ployhart, & Weekley, 2015), but theories such as similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) and attraction-selection-attrition model (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995) do indicate that interpersonal factors make the place in employees' turnover. Some empirical research also suggests that employees do not always act in isolation in terms of turnover (e.g., Felps et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2019). There exist ripple effects that a person's leaving may influence other people within the teams or organizations. Therefore, an emerging subset of turnover research attempts to investigate employees' turnover in the context of coworkers' voluntary turnover. However, existing theory and empirical analysis have offered mixed findings, indicating two different phenomena of focal employees' turnover. On one hand, a number of studies suggest that coworkers' turnover will lead to more employees' turnover, reporting focal employees with lower job satisfaction, higher turnover intention or actual turnover behavior after coworkers' turnover (e.g., Feeley & Barnett, 1997). On the other hand, some research implies that coworkers' turnover will not result in more employees' turnover, reporting focal employees with higher job satisfaction, higher commitment or no turnover behavior after coworkers' turnover (e.g., Krackhardt & Porter, 1985). Moreover, scholars still know little about the specific mechanism through which the ripple effects occur.

Problems with this stream of research are that they merely take coworkers' turnover as a dichotomous event. More specifically, turnover is mainly conceptualized as whether turnover happens (i.e., YES or NO; Hausknecht, 2017; Hom, Lee, Shaw, & Hausknecht, 2017). Although scholars have recognized the importance of mobility directions (e.g., Feldman & Ng, 2007; George, Chattopadhyay, & Zhang, 2012), little research on this topic has been conducted in the area of turnover. We argue that further investigation on mobility directions of coworkers' turnover can help to clarify the mixed findings mentioned above. Prior studies on mobility directions primarily observe whether the direction of job change is upward,

downward or lateral (e.g., Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2010), but lack deep discussion on a specific direction (e.g., the extent of upward mobility). Given the dominant mobility direction in the workplace is upward mobility (Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012), it is necessary to explore how different levels of upward mobility function in turnover context. In current study, integrating research on employee turnover with social comparison theory, we attempt to unfold the mechanism of how coworkers' upward mobility influences employees' turnover intention. We focus on upward mobility which is defined as the extent to which coworkers move upwardly to other organizations (George et al., 2012), rather than non-upward mobility, for several reasons. For one thing, while acknowledging the diversity of mobility directions, representation and attention of mobility directions preponderant in the literature is still upward mobility (Hall & Heras, 2009). As individuals are less likely to take their initiative to leave for a worse job (Ng et al., 2010; Reitzle, Körner, & Vondracek, 2009; Wolff & Moser, 2010), upward mobility is more common than non-upward mobility in the workplace. A systematic review of empirical studies clearly show that upward mobility is still the norm in career patterns (Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012). For another, since social comparison theory was put forward, Festinger (1954) has highlighted the "unidirectional drive upward" embedded in human psychology. Under such inherent drive, individuals hold a strong preference for upward instead of downward or lateral comparison (Garcia, Song, & Tesser, 2010; Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018). Although downward comparison theory proposed by Wills (1981) raises some concern later on, a meta-analysis of last 60 years of social comparison research finds that the predominant tendency for individuals is to compare upwardly (Gerber et al., 2018). Therefore, coworkers' upward mobility rather than non-upward mobility attracts more attention from focal employees when they make social comparison.

Driven by social comparison, we propose that coworkers' upward mobility would evoke focal employees' evaluation of their own employability (i.e., perceived employability), which further impacts their turnover intention. Perceived employability is defined as individuals' perceived ability to attain new employment (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010). Faced with the uncertainty of labor market, employees would carefully evaluate their employability before turnover (Smith, 2010). In the context of coworkers' turnover, coworkers' upward

mobility, which helps employees to judge coworkers' employability, provides the basis for employees to evaluate their own employability through social comparison. Employees' perceived employability would further motivate employees to consider other job alternatives, shaping employees' turnover intention (De Cuyper, Mauno, Kinnunen, & Mäkikangas, 2011). All together, we argue that employees' perceived employability mediates the relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and employees' turnover intention. More importantly, employees are selective when choosing reference groups for their social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Attributes similarity has been shown to not only influence employees' choices of reference coworkers (e.g., Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975), but to shape the strength of relationships that are explained by social comparison theory (e.g., Gartenberg & Wulf, 2017; Obloj & Zenger, 2017). However, so far, we still know little about how attribute similarity shapes the effect of coworkers' upward mobility on employees' turnover intention. In particular, we propose prior job similarity, which refers to the degree of similarity between coworkers' and employees' jobs when the two parties were still working together (Pieper, 2015; Pieper, Trevor, Weller, & Duchon, 2019), as the specific attribute similarity in our research context, and argue that it may profoundly shape the strength of the relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and employees' perceived employability. Our theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 near here]

This study makes the following contributions. First, it contributes to the literature of traditional turnover by highlighting the value of examining turnover beyond a dichotomy way and offering a new angle to revisit the phenomenon of employee turnover. In previous literature, researchers mostly conceptualize turnover as leaving or not (Hausknecht, 2017; Hom et al., 2017). While there is a consensus on the significant role of mobility directions (e.g., Feldman & Ng, 2007; George et al., 2012), less attention has been paid to this topic in the area of turnover. In current study, adopting the angle of coworkers' upward mobility redirects the focus from simply taking turnover as a dichotomous event to considering the mobility direction of turnover. Our research reveals that coworkers' upward mobility holds an indispensable place in predicting employees' turnover intention. In so doing, we also help to explain the mixed findings obtained in the previous turnover research concerning how

coworkers' turnover influences employees' turnover decision (e.g., Feeley & Barnett, 1997; Krackhardt & Porter, 1985). That is coworkers' turnover will lead to more focal employees' turnover if coworkers' upward mobility is high, especially when focal employees' jobs are more similar to coworkers' prior jobs. However, coworkers' turnover will not result in more employees' turnover if coworkers' upward mobility is low or prior job similarity between focal employees and coworkers is low.

Second, we enrich research on turnover ripple effects via concentrating on those employees who remain in the organizations under the context of coworkers' voluntary turnover. While much is known about the turnover ripple effects caused by coworkers' involuntary turnover (usually termed lay-off or downsizing; e.g., Arshad & Sparrow, 2010), limited work has focused on the context of coworkers' voluntary turnover. Moreover, although previous research has suggested to take a social lens such as social network perspective to explicate the impacts of coworkers' turnover on remaining employees, they fail to specify and examine those underlying mechanisms (e.g., Krackhardt & Porter, 1985). In current research, we turn to social comparison theory as our overarching perspective and unfold the specific mechanism of how coworkers' upward mobility influences remaining employees' turnover intention.

Third, our study also advances the research on mobility directions by revealing the necessity for further investigation of specific directions in more various contexts. Although mobility directions have been warmly discussed in society and career literature (e.g., Feldman & Ng, 2007; George et al., 2012), it draws little attention in other fields of research, such as employee turnover. Besides, prior studies on mobility directions mainly treat a specific direction as dichotomy (e.g., upward or not; Ng et al., 2010), but lack further exploration on the extent of a specific direction like different levels of upward mobility. Recent research has suggested that the extent of specific directions plays an important role in employee attitudes and behaviors, such as group identification and organizational citizenship behavior (George et al., 2012). In current research, we provide additional and strong evidence that, in turnover context, coworkers' upward mobility can predict employees' turnover intention.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Coworkers' upward mobility

Job mobility can be divided into inter-firm mobility (i.e., turnover) or intra-firm mobility according to change of employers (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Ng et al., 2010). And mobility direction has been classified into upward, lateral or downward to describe the directions of individuals' job mobility (e.g., Ng et al., 2010; Reitzle et al., 2009; Veiga, 1983). Sociology theorists have investigated the consequences of mobility directions in social group, such as the impacts of individuals' perceptions of upward mobility on their group identification and satisfaction (e.g., Ellemers, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990). Recently, scholars apply those findings in organizational context. Ng et al. (2010) discuss how mobility directions affect employees' reactions, for example, low levels of upward mobility lead to poorer work attitudes. George et al. (2012) examine the role of perceived upward mobility in shaping employees' identification, organization-based self-esteem and organizational citizenship behavior in blended workgroup. In this study, we focus on inter-firm mobility direction in terms of upward mobility and define coworkers' upward mobility as the extent to which coworkers move upwardly to other organizations.

Focal employees' perception of employability as a mediator between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' turnover intention.

Drawing from social comparison theory, we argue that coworkers' upward mobility can shape employees' perceived employability in the context of coworkers' turnover. Perceived employability refers to individuals' perceived ability to attain new employment (Wittekind et al., 2010). It involves the subjective interpretation of abilities to get a new job (Chen & Lim, 2012), thus it is very likely to be affected by the social context like coworkers' upward mobility. Specifically, coworkers' upward mobility can provide useful information about coworkers' turnover, helping employees to assess coworkers' employability. From the perspective of focal employees, intuitively, high levels of coworkers' upward mobility tend to bring about high perceived coworkers' employability, while low levels of coworkers' upward mobility tend to generate low perceived coworkers' employability. The perception of

coworkers' employability further furnishes the basis for employees to evaluate their own employability through social comparison.

Given high levels of risk and uncertainty characterizing to turnover (Felps et al., 2009), employees would carefully evaluate their employability before turnover (Smith, 2010). Based on previous literature, we argue that assimilation effect is very likely to occur during the process of employees' social comparison under the context of coworkers' turnover (e.g., Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007). Assimilation effect refers that individuals believe they will achieve the same results or have the same ability as their comparison targets (Buunk, Zurriaga, Péiró, Nauta, & Gosalvez, 2005). In other words, focal employees would tend to perceive that they have the same employability in the labor market as their departed coworkers.

Although social comparison generates contrast or assimilation effects, the salient effect depends on employees' relationship with their departed coworkers and employees' underlying motivation for social comparison (Collins, 1996; Mussweiler, 2003). Previous findings have offered supports for the assimilation effect in our research context. First, competitive relationships tend to generate contrast, while cooperative relationships tend to bring about assimilation (Stapel & Koomen, 2001, 2005). Based on theories of internal labor market, departed coworkers are less likely to be considered as competitors by focal employees, because these coworkers have already left for other organizations and will no longer struggle for internal resources (e.g. power and promotion opportunity) against focal employees (Swab & Johnson, 2019). Hence, the contrast effect is unlikely to occur. On the contrary, these departed coworkers can be treated as helpers for unconsciously offering useful turnover information for focal employees. Second, according to research on focus of comparison, social comparison focusing on the target first (i.e., other-to-self pattern) yields more assimilation, while focusing on the self first (i.e., self-to-other pattern) yields more contrast (Kuhnen & Haberstroh, 2004; Mussweiler, 2001). We would expect that, in our theoretical model where the starting point of the comparison is coworkers (other-to-self pattern), focal employees' self-evaluations are assimilated to departed coworkers. Third, based on selective accessibility model, in most cases, especially for ability evaluation, employees' making comparison increases the accessibility of standard-consistent knowledge, which easily results

in assimilation (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). Moreover, motivation for self-improvement in social comparison also tends to cause assimilation effect (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Longing for a better life is the nature of mankind. Employees always desire to improve their employment such as moving up in the job ladder (Ng et al., 2010). Thus, focal employees' instinctive motivation of improving employment will also trigger assimilation effect. Previous research also shows that when employees believe their desires (e.g., getting better jobs) are attainable and controllable within their abilities, assimilation effect is more likely to occur during the process of social comparison (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Thus, higher levels of coworkers' upward mobility, which reflect coworkers' higher employability in the labor market, make the focal employees perceive the same higher employability of their own. Accordingly, we argue that coworkers' upward mobility is positively related to focal employees' perception of employability.

Additionally, research on employability has highlighted the vital role of perceived employability in employees' turnover. Employability shares some conceptual grounds with external job opportunity (March & Simon, 1958) and perceived alternatives (Gerhart, 1990), but "puts a relatively strong emphasis on individuals' ability" (De Cuyper et al., 2011, p. 254). It reflects individuals' beliefs about how easy it is to find new employment (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2008). Higher employability will evoke employees to consider alternative jobs, which increases employees' turnover intention. As early as 1958, March and Simon (1958) put forward the notion of external job opportunity as one of the vital factors to explain employees' leaving. Soon afterwards, Mobley (1977) built an intermediate linkage model to specify the critical effect of external job opportunity on initiating employees' turnover intention. Empirical studies also reveal the importance of perceived employability in shaping employees' turnover intention (e.g., De Cuyper et al., 2011). Hence, we argue that focal employees' perception of employability is positively associated with focal employees' turnover intention. To sum up, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: The positive relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' turnover intention is mediated by focal employees' perception of employability.

The moderating role of prior job similarity

Based on social comparison theory, individuals selectively make comparison with what Festinger (1954) labels reference groups. Importantly, attributes similarity is critical not only in individuals' choices of reference groups (e.g., Zanna et al., 1975), but also in shaping the strength of relationships explicated by social comparison theory (e.g., Gartenberg & Wulf, 2017; Obloj & Zenger, 2017). Under high levels of attributes similarity, individuals are more likely to trust their reference groups and engage in social comparison (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Festinger, 1954), thereby enhancing the strength of relationships that are explained by social comparison.

In previous studies, researchers have examined the important role of attributes similarity in communication efficiency (Gatignon & Robertson, 1985), social norms (Di Stefano, King, & Verona, 2014), pay inequity (Gartenberg & Wulf, 2017) and employees' productivity (Obloj & Zenger, 2017) etc. Different researchers choose different attributes based on their specific research contexts (e.g., Kulik & Ambrose, 1992; Meisel & Blumberg, 1990). For example, Obloj and Zenger (2017) empirically examine that the negative relationship between peers receiving greater rewards and employees' productivity is exacerbated under high levels of peers' social similarity to employees (i.e., a count of the outlet manager's friends).

As voluntary turnover inflicts risk and cost on individuals (Felps et al., 2009), it is crucial for focal employees to choose alike coworkers for social comparison. We argue that attributes similarity can shape the effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' perception of employability. In particular, we specify attribute similarity as prior job similarity between focal employees and departed coworkers in our research context. Prior job similarity is defined as the degree of similarity between coworkers' and employees' jobs when the two parties were still working together (Pieper, 2015; Pieper et al., 2019), that is how similar are coworkers to employees in terms of job facets before coworkers quit their jobs, including job tenure, job responsibility, job qualification, job duty and job performance. Prior job similarity reflects the comparability between focal employees and departed coworkers in terms of jobs in the workplace.

From the perspective of social comparison, employees won't make comparison with others who have large differences from them (Festinger, 1954). Under high levels of prior job similarity, focal employees would believe that their departed coworkers are strongly comparable and trusty to themselves (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Thus, focal employees are more likely to engage in social comparison with their departed coworkers, which further enhances the strength of relationships between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' perception of employability. Whereas, under low levels of prior job similarity, coworkers' upward mobility even can not invoke focal employees' social comparison as low levels of prior job similarity suggest that coworkers are not suitable references to help focal employees assess their own employability. Accordingly, the higher prior job similarity, the stronger the effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' perception of employability. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Prior job similarity moderates the positive relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' perception of employability such that the relationship is stronger with higher prior job similarity.

Furthermore, these hypotheses suggest a first-stage moderation (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). In selective accessibility model, assimilative social comparison is accompanied by a general informational focus on similarities (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004). Assimilation effects become stronger if focal employees engage in the comparison process via selectively focusing on the ways in which they are similar to departed coworkers. This indicates that under the condition of focal employees perceiving similarity to departed coworkers, they are more likely to assimilate their self-evaluations towards departed coworkers and behave the same as departed coworkers. Moreover, according to the proxy model in social comparison, comparison targets serve as a proxy informing individuals that they will perform similarly (Martin, 2000). In current research, coworkers' upward mobility provides an appropriate basis for employees to evaluate coworkers' employability which is the proxy of employees' own employability, and further offers support for focal employees' turnover decision. When the similarity in certain dimension between employees and coworkers improves (i.e., prior job similarity in this study), coworkers' upward mobility

would offer more useful and accurate proxy of employability (Martin, 2000), offering stronger supports for employees' own decision making. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3: Prior job similarity moderates the indirect positive effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' turnover intention via the focal employees' perception of employability such that the mediation relationship is stronger with higher prior job similarity.

Methods

Sample and procedure

Data was collected from full-time employees in Zhejiang province. Zhejiang, located on the south-eastern coast of China, is a developed region. As early as 2005, the World Competitiveness Report ranked Zhejiang 18th globally in terms of government efficiency (IMD, 2005). Besides, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, Zhejiang already became one of the fastest developing provinces in China, with both total GDP and GDP per capita ranked fourth among all provinces in 2006 (Wang, Guidice, Tansky, & Wang, 2010). Given Zhejiang being among the most liberalized and competitive regions in China (Opper, Nee, & Holm, 2017), the local labor market is full of vitality and freedom. Thus, employees in Zhejiang have adequate opportunities to voluntarily change their jobs and careers, which offers a suitable context for us to study how focal employees react to coworkers' upward mobility. Respondents in our research worked in different industries, such as manufacturing, media, electronic and finance. We contacted the companies that we can reached out and emailed the HR managers with invitation letters setting out the nature of our research and our research procedures. We also provided assurances that the responses provided by employees would be confidential and anonymous. Employees were randomly selected to participate in our research project by the HR managers. With the help of HR managers, questionnaires were distributed with sealed envelopes to employees, and each questionnaire was taken back by the researchers once it was finished. All participation was voluntary. To reduce the potential for common method biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), we conducted a

two-wave survey with the gap of one month (as was done in the study by Peltokorpi, Allen, & Froese, 2015). As an incentive to participate, the participating employees received a small monetary incentive for each wave of questionnaires they completed. To allow matching, all participants in both surveys were required to fill in the final four digits of their phone number.

In each wave of the survey, respondents were informed that coworkers refer to “anyone you work with who is not your direct supervisor” (Colbert et al., 2016) in our questionnaires. Moreover, given that our validated responses require participants to experience coworkers’ turnover in the last six months (as the period recommended by previous scholars, e.g., Watrous, Huffman, & Pritchard, 2006), the question of “whether there are coworkers who voluntarily departed for other jobs in the last six months” was placed at the beginning of our questionnaires in the Time 1 survey. In the Time 1 survey, the participants were asked to report their coworkers’ upward mobility, their perception of employability, prior job similarity and demographic information including age, gender, tenure, types of department and company ownership. Turnover intention and job satisfaction was collected from those participants in the Time 2 survey. 450 questionnaires were distributed with 428 valid responses returned in T1. In T2, we distributed 428 questionnaires to those valid participants and finally got 369 effective matching samples.

A preliminary analysis revealed that 48% of the respondents were female; 52% were 20-30 years old; 22% were 31-40 years old; 22% were 41-50 years old; 4% were others; 15% of the respondents’ tenure was less than 1 year; 28% was 1-2 years; 26% was 3-5 years, 12% was 6-10 years; and 19% was over 10 years; 60% from manufacturing department, 10% from R&D department, 10% from sales department and 20% from administration department; 33% work in state-owned company, 59% work in private company, 5% work in oversea company and 3% work in entrepreneurial company.

Measures

The measures were translated into Chinese using a double-blind back-translation procedure. We used 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale items were averaged such that higher scores indicated a greater degree of the underlying construct.

Coworkers' upward mobility

Generally, there are two types of methods to conceptualize coworkers' upward mobility. The first type is objective, like counting the numbers of coworkers who moved upwardly to other organizations. Whereas the second type is subjective, such as using an overall evaluation method to assess coworkers' upward mobility. Although the biggest advantage of the first type lies in its objectivity, it is very likely to be contaminated as objective criteria are easily influenced by factors beyond a person's control, and also likely to be deficient because objective criteria fail to capture relevant facets of the focal construct (Heslin, 2005). The second type, however, can accurately capture individuals' immediate psychological reactions or understandings towards the environment (Shore, Newton, & Thornton, 1990), while the objective one can not. In our research, we are concern about how focal employees perceive and understand when facing coworkers' turnover. Therefore, to investigate how employees react to coworkers' upward mobility, we follow previous research adopting subjective conceptualization method (e.g., Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Colquitt, Lepine, Zapata, & Wild, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Uy, Lin, & Ilies, 2017) to conceptualize coworkers' upward mobility as an overall evaluation of the extent to which coworkers move upwardly to other organizations. Accordingly, the overall evaluation method is used to measure coworkers' upward mobility. Based on Brockner and Dong (1993) work, we adapted a four-item scale to measure coworkers' upward mobility as evaluated by the focal employee. We measure the extent to which coworkers move upwardly to other organizations in terms of higher positions, more pay and benefits, better career development opportunities and the overall perception of leaving for better jobs. A sample item is, "On average, my departed coworkers are offered higher positions than before" ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Focal employee's perception of employability

We adopted 11 items that emphasize work-related factors from the Employment Opportunity Index (EOI) scales developed by Griffeth, Steel, Allen, and Bryan (2005) to measure the focal employee's perception of employability. A sample item reads "Given my qualifications and experience, getting a new job would not be very hard at all" ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Prior job similarity

As with coworkers' upward mobility, an overall evaluation method was used to capture prior job similarity. We adapted a five-item scale based on Brockner and Dong (1993) to measure prior job similarity with the instruction to "recall the situation at the time when you still worked together with those departed coworkers". We measure the similarity in terms of job tenure, job responsibility, job qualification, job duty and job performance. A sample item is "At that time, I was similar to my departed coworkers in terms of job performance" ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Focal employee's turnover intention

We measured the focal employee's turnover intention using a four-item scale developed by Farh, Tsui, Xin, and Cheng (1998). A sample item is "I may leave this company and work for another company in the next year" ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Control variables

To rule out alternative explanations, we included several control variables in our study. We controlled focal employees' demographic variables including age, gender, and tenure because previous research shows that these variables can influence employees' turnover intention (Chen, Ford, Kalyanaram, & Bhagat, 2012; Park, Newman, Zhang, Wu, & Hooke, 2016). Job satisfaction is a significant organizational factor that affects employees' turnover intention (Mobley, Horner, & Hollingsworth, 1978), thus we included focal employee's job satisfaction as a control variable. Focal employee's job satisfaction was measured by a widely used three-item global job satisfaction scale from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). A sample item is "All in all, I am satisfied with my job" ($\alpha = 0.87$). Besides, department with four categories: manufacturing, R&D, sales and administration and company ownership with four categories: state-owned, private, oversea and entrepreneurial were statistically controlled because of their potential influences. A dummy variable was assigned to each category.

Results and analysis

Discriminant validity

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to examine the validity of four key variables (coworkers' upward mobility, prior job similarity, focal employees' perception of employability, and focal employees' turnover intention) before testing our hypotheses (Table 1). The four-factor model fit statistics were modest ($\chi^2 = 550.938$, $df = 242$, CFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.06). We compared this four-factor model with a variety of alternatives models. First, we examined the fit of the three-factor model in which we combined the items measuring coworkers' upward mobility and prior job similarity into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 927.087$, $df = 245$, CFI = 0.82, IFI = 0.82, RMSEA = 0.09), then combined perception of employability and turnover intention into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 800.07$, $df = 245$, CFI = 0.85, IFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.08), and finally combined coworkers' upward mobility and perception of employability into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 835.80$, $df = 245$, CFI = 0.84, IFI = 0.84, RMSEA = 0.08). We also examined a two-factor model in which we combined coworkers' upward mobility, prior job similarity, and perception of employability into a single factor ($\chi^2 = 1196.40$, $df = 247$, CFI = 0.75, IFI = 0.75, RMSEA = 0.10). Finally, we considered a one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 1580.61$, $df = 248$, CFI = 0.64, IFI = 0.65, RMSEA = 0.12). Taken together, we concluded that the proposed model was superior to all alternative models. Hence, the discriminant validity of the four variables was supported.

[Table 1 near here]

Common method bias

We performed Harman's single-factor test, which is one of the widely used technique that has been used by researchers to address the issue of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). If common method variance were a serious problem, we would expect a single factor to emerge from a factor analysis or one general factor to account for most of the covariance in the variables (Podsakoff, & Organ, 1986; Aulakh, & Gencturk, 2000). We loaded all variables into an exploratory factor analysis and examined the unrotated factor solution. Results extracted five factors with five values greater than one, and no general factor was apparent in the unrotated factor structure with Factor 1 accounting for 25.386% of the variance, Factor 2 accounting for 10.858% of the variance, Factor 3 accounting for 9.505% of the variance, Factor 4 accounting for 8.406% of the variance and Factor 5 accounting for 6.854% of the

variance. Thus, this post hoc test suggested that common method variance was not of great concern. Besides, results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) conducted in our manuscript, which showed the hypothesized four-factor model better fit the data ($\chi^2 = 550.938$, $df = 242$, $CFI = 0.92$, $IFI = 0.92$, $RMSEA = 0.06$) than any other alternative models, not only supported the convergent validity and the discriminate validity of our measurement model, but also demonstrated that the probability of common method variance occurring was minimized (Podsakoff, & Organ, 1986; Iverson, & Maguire, 2000). Moreover, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), we also tried other techniques to control the common method bias as possible as we can, such as temporal separation of measurement, protecting respondent anonymity and reducing evaluation apprehension.

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were presented in Table 2. Coworkers' upward mobility was positively correlated with both focal employees' perception of employability ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and focal employees' turnover intention ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, focal employees' perception of employability was positively correlated with focal employees' turnover intention ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$). These results provide the necessary premises for hypothesis testing.

[Table 2 near here]

We tested our hypotheses with multiple regression analyses and table 3 summarized those results. Besides, as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008), the bootstrap methods (PROCESS) was also used to examine the moderated mediation hypotheses. To test H1, we estimated a direct effect model in which coworkers' upward mobility was positively and significantly related to focal employees' turnover intention ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$, M_5). We further estimated a direct effect model in which coworkers' upward mobility was positively and significantly related to focal employees' perception of employability ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$, M_2). Then we estimated M_6 in which after adding coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' perception of employability into the model together, the influence of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' turnover intention ($\beta = 0.02$, n.s.) became insignificant, while the influence of focal employees' perception of employability on focal employees'

turnover intention ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$) was significant. Hence, H1 was supported. We further conducted bootstrapping process to offer additional verification of the mediating effect. After controlling for focal employees' demographic variables, the results showed that total effect was significant (total effect = 0.15, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.26]) and coworkers' upward mobility was found to have an indirect effect on focal employees' turnover intention (indirect effect = 0.12, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.20]) via focal employees' perception of employability. Given that the confidence intervals for the indirect effects were positive and statistically different from zero, H1 was again supported.

[Table 3 near here]

In terms of H2, as indicated by M_3 in Table 3, the cross-product term between coworkers' upward mobility and prior job similarity was significant for focal employees' perception of employability ($\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$). Simple slopes analyses were conducted to further examine the nature of the significant interaction between coworkers' upward mobility and prior job similarity. As depicted in Figure 2, at high levels of prior job similarity, there was a significant positive relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' perception of employability ($t = 6.96, \beta = 0.44, p < 0.001$). In contrast, at low levels of prior job similarity, the relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' perception of employability was nonsignificant ($t = 1.45, \beta = 0.09, p = 0.15$). Thus, H2 was supported.

[Figure 2 near here]

To test the moderated mediating effect of H3, we conducted moderated mediation path analysis according to using PROCESS program (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results, shown in Table 4, revealed that the conditional indirect effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' turnover intention through focal employees' perception of employability was significant under high levels of prior job similarity (indirect effect = 0.20, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.30]) but not under low levels of prior job similarity (indirect effect = 0.04, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.12]). We also obtained a significant index of moderated mediation ($\beta = 0.10, SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.16]). Accordingly, H3 was supported.

[Table 4 near here]

As multiple regression analyses fail to consider the issues of measurement errors, we also perform the structure equation model through Mplus Version 8 to test our hypothesis as supplementary. Specifically, the mediation effect test based on a bootstrapping analysis simulation with 5,000 replications indicated that the indirect effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' turnover intention through focal employees' perceived employability was positive and significant ($b = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.34]), providing support for Hypotheses 1. The moderation effect test showed that the interaction term between coworkers' upward mobility and prior job similarity was positively related with focal employees' perceived employability ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$), providing support for Hypotheses 2. The moderated mediation effect test showed that the indirect effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' turnover intention through focal employees' perceived employability was positive and significant ($b = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.28]) when prior job similarity was high, but not significant ($b = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.11]) when prior job similarity was low, providing support for Hypotheses 3. Therefore, the conclusions of our research stay unchanged after changing the regression method, which can add more robustness to our findings.

Discussion

With temporally lagged data collected from 369 employees in China, our data analysis results showed that regardless of the levels of job satisfaction, the positive relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and focal employees' turnover intention was mediated by focal employees' perception of employability. In line with the assimilation effect in social comparison (Buunk et al., 2005), our findings revealed that higher levels of coworkers' upward mobility led to higher perception of focal employees' employability and further enhanced focal employees' turnover intention. Prior job similarity also moderated the mediated relationship mentioned above. Consistent with previous findings, prior job similarity enhanced the strength of the relationships explained by social comparison (e.g., Gartenberg & Wulf, 2017). More importantly, our results showed that the indirect effect of coworkers' upward mobility on focal employees' turnover intention was significant with high levels of prior job similarity but not low levels of prior job similarity. This corresponds with

the arguments of social comparison theory declaring that individuals do not engage in social comparison when the comparison targets are perceived as too different from themselves (e.g., Blanton et al., 1999).

Theoretical implications

The present study has theoretical implications for several streams of research. First, it advances the development of turnover research by pointing out a new angle to revisit the phenomenon of employee turnover. Traditionally, turnover is conceptualized as a dichotomy, that is whether turnover happens (Hausknecht, 2017; Hom et al., 2017). Although the importance of mobility directions has been recognized (e.g., Feldman & Ng, 2007; George et al., 2012), our understanding of its role in employee turnover remains limited. In this research, applying the angle of coworkers' upward mobility shifts away from the predominant focus on treating coworkers' turnover as a dichotomous event to instead focus on considering the mobility direction of turnover that can have very different consequences in predicting employees' turnover intention. Indeed, we show that coworkers' upward mobility does play an indispensable role in predicting employees' turnover intention, which can also help to explain the mixed findings obtained in the previous turnover research concerning how coworkers' turnover influences employees' turnover decision. This inconsistency in previous research which takes coworkers' turnover as a dichotomous event indicates two different phenomena of focal employees' turnover. While some scholars suggest that coworkers' turnover will lead to more employees' turnover, reporting focal employees with lower job satisfaction, higher turnover intention or actual turnover behavior after coworkers' turnover (e.g., Feeley & Barnett, 1997). Others imply that coworkers' turnover will not result in more employees' turnover, reporting focal employees with higher job satisfaction, higher commitment or no turnover behavior after coworkers' turnover (e.g., Krackhardt and Porter, 1985). Our theoretical model offers a new angle which has been ignored in previous research to draw the inconsistency mentioned above. That is coworkers' turnover will lead to more focal employees' turnover if coworkers' upward mobility is high, especially when focal employees' jobs are more similar to coworkers' prior jobs. However, coworkers' turnover will not result in more employees' turnover if coworkers' upward mobility is low or the similarity between focal

employees' jobs and coworkers' prior jobs is low. Therefore, our research highlights the value of examining turnover beyond a dichotomy way and the necessity of paying attention to the richer contents of turnover (Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2013), such as upward mobility of turnover.

Second, it extends our understanding of turnover effects by concentrating on those employees remaining within the organizations under the context of coworkers' voluntary turnover. Till now, turnover ripple effects have not been well studied. Although prior studies have provided valuable insights into turnover resulted from coworkers' involuntary turnover (e.g., Arshad & Sparrow, 2010), little knowledge exists regarding the context of coworkers' voluntary turnover. In the era of boundaryless career, voluntary turnover within the teams or organization is more pervasive than ever before (Sammorra et al., 2013). Our study contributes to the accumulative knowledge of how the remaining employees react to coworkers' voluntary turnover. Besides, we also help to unfold the specific mechanism through which the ripple effects of coworkers' turnover occur. Despite scholars' calls for taking a social lens to unfold the influences of coworkers' turnover on the remaining employees, previous research fails to specify and examine the underlying mechanisms (e.g., Krackhardt & Porter, 1985). In this study, we employ social comparison theory as our overarching perspective and propose that employees' perceived employability mediates the positive relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and employees' turnover intention. Adopting prior job similarity as a contingency, we further add a fine grain to understand triggers of the influence of coworkers' upward mobility on employees' turnover intention, and provide additional empirical evidence supporting that job similarity is an important form of attribute similarity in social comparison in the workplace.

Third, we also contribute to the research on mobility directions by showing the necessity for further investigation of specific directions in more various contexts. Mobility directions have received considerable attention among society and career scholars. Both the antecedents and consequences of upward mobility have been widely examined in career research as well as sociology research. For instance, scholars find that industrial segmentation, social class, organizational size, and personality traits etc. can shape individuals' upward mobility (e.g., Carroll & Mayer, 1986; Ng et al., 2010), and that upward mobility can impact individuals'

career success, work attitudes, group identification and satisfaction etc. (e.g., Feldman & Ng, 2007; George et al., 2012). However, mobility directions have been relatively overlooked in other fields of research, like employee turnover. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to link mobility directions to employee turnover literature. Moreover, previous research on mobility directions generally treats a specific direction as dichotomy (e.g., upward or not Ng et al., 2010) with limited consideration given to the extent of a specific direction, such as different levels of upward mobility. Our findings do suggest that different levels of upward mobility play an important role in shaping employees' turnover intention. Hence, this study highlights the value of further investigation into specific mobility directions and calls for more research applying mobility directions in more various contexts.

Furthermore, this study also responds to calls for more comprehensive research on different aspects of lateral relationships such as relationships with coworkers in the workplace (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Mossholder, Settoon, & Henagan, 2005). Although the importance of one's coworkers has been widely supported in the social psychological literature, it has been largely overshadowed in the organizational behavior literature, especially in the research on employee turnover (Felps et al., 2009). The fine-grained model in this study enriches our knowledge of coworkers' influence in shaping employees' intention in workplace.

Practical implications

Our research also has practical implications for managers who are suffering from employee turnover. Employee turnover has a negative impact on organizational performance and the prospect of collective turnover is even worse (Heavey, Holwerda, & Hausknecht, 2013). Our theoretical model offers important managerial implications to retain employees by properly intervening employee turnover that results from coworker turnover.

Where should intervention be directed? Our findings show that coworkers' turnover would not result in more employees' turnover if coworkers' upward mobility is low or the similarity between focal employees' jobs and coworkers' prior jobs is low. This can help managers to easily identify the small cohort of employees who are most likely to quit their jobs in the context of coworkers' turnover. Specifically, we suggest that managers should first

trace and have a good command of the situation of recently departed coworkers, such as their different levels of upward mobility. Then employees surrounded by departed coworkers with high upward mobility should be paid close attention to. Besides, it might be more efficient for managers to care for the employees who have high prior job similarity with departed coworkers with high upward mobility. If necessity, managers can intentionally involve in those employees that they wish to retain by taking constructive action such as career development conversation.

Limitations and future directions

As with any empirical research, our study has several limitations, which also provides springboards for future research. First, some data limitations suggest that the results should be carefully interpreted. In current research, we look at turnover intention rather than actual turnover. In general, turnover intention has been an extremely powerful concept that helps us understand employee attitudes and behaviors (Das, Nandialath, & Mohan, 2013). While often used as a proxy for real turnover, turnover intention is the most direct predictor of whether an employee would actually stay or leave (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2013). And our rationale for using turnover intention as dependent variable is very straightforward: we aim to understand the immediate psychological outcome when focal employees face coworkers' upward mobility. But, without any doubts, it is desirable to use actual turnover as independent variables in future research as it directly reflects employees' turnover decision.

The second limitation of this research is mainly concerned with the alternative explanations for our proposed relationships. Specifically, in current research, we only control focal employees' job satisfaction and demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and tenure etc. Previous research has used employees' job satisfaction, which is conceptualized as the sense of satisfaction with the quality of supervision, pay, promotion and other aspects of the job, to control some contextual variables accounting for employees' turnover intention (e.g., Felps et al., 2009; Hausknecht, Hiller, & Vance, 2008; Voigt & Hirst, 2015). But, strictly speaking, the inclusion of job satisfaction can actually only exclude low satisfaction as an alternative interpretation of our results. A recent meta-analysis (Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell, 2018) finds that although traditional job attitudes like job satisfaction have stronger

and more stable effects on employees' turnover, other organizational-level factors (e.g., organizational climate and leadership; Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002; Palanski, Avey, & Jiraporn, 2013), job-level factors (e.g., pay and promotion; Buttner & Lowe, 2017; Nyberg, 2010), and individual-level factors (e.g., personality; Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005) do make some place. That is, there may be other potential factors that cause the positive relationship between coworkers' upward mobility and turnover intention, such as low pay (Tekleab, Bartol, & Liu, 2005), abusive supervision (Palanski et al., 2013), unethical leadership (Cialdini, Li, Samper, & Wellman, 2019) or negative organizational climate (Sharoni et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important for future studies to carefully and comprehensively consider their control variables, which can not only rule out interpretations based on common third variables, but also help to establish coworkers' upward mobility as the causal trigger for the employee's turnover intentions.

There is also a possibility that coworkers' turnover reduces competition for internal resources such as power, training chances and promotion opportunity against focal employees (Swab & Johnson, 2019), but the current research does not incorporate these factors into the research framework or measure their potential influence on focal employees' turnover intention. Future studies that explore how the change of intra-organizational opportunity after coworkers' turnover impacts the attitudes and behaviors of the remaining employees in the organizations may add to our knowledge of this area. In addition, it is also plausible that we should control employee's actual personal capability in our research as it may influence employees' perceived employability. Unfortunately, referring to previous research on perceived employability (e.g., De Cuyper, Van der Heijden, & De Witte, 2011; Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018; Rodrigues, Butler, & Guest, 2019), we only use demographic variables to control individual differences in actual personal capabilities and did not directly measure and control their actual personal capabilities. Hence, a valuable contribution of future studies would be taking more potential influence factors into consideration, which could be integrated as moderator or alternative mechanisms for the model developed in this study.

In terms of mobility direction, current research only examines the role of coworkers' upward mobility in predicting employees' turnover intention. Although upward mobility is

still the norm in the workplace (Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012), we believe that it is valuable to further investigate the influence of other directions such as lateral or downward mobility (Reitzle et al., 2009) in turnover context. It could also be interesting to compare the effects of different mobility directions in future research. Besides, the findings of our research may be subject to common method bias. Collecting data using the same rater can result in a bias that may affect the validity and reliability of the results (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Notably, however, results of our common method bias test suggest that same-source bias did not overly influence our findings. Finally, even though we separated data collection on some of the variables by one month, the research design still limited our ability to infer causality because it is essentially cross-sectional (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008). Future research efforts are therefore encouraged to address this issue by using a longitudinal or experimental design to draw causal inferences.

Conclusion

The mixed findings prompted us to scrutinize the links between coworkers' upward mobility and subsequent employee turnover intention. Omitting coworkers' mobility direction as a factor affecting subsequent employees' turnover intention is bound to produce imprecise models of employee turnover. Combined research on employee turnover with social comparison theory, we find that coworkers' upward mobility positively relates to focal employees' turnover intention via focal employees' perception of employability. These results offer further insights by showing that this mediated relationship depends on prior job similarity such that it is significant with high but not low levels of prior job similarity. We hope that this study can stimulate more research investigating turnover effects beyond taking turnover as a dichotomous event. After all, voluntary turnover is now a prevailing but intractable issue in organizational management.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1. Summary of model fit indexes

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	CFI	IFI	RMSEA
Four-factor	550.938	242	0.92	0.92	0.06
Three-factor ^a	927.087	245	0.82	0.82	0.09
Three-factor ^b	800.07	245	0.85	0.85	0.08
Three-factor ^c	835.80	245	0.84	0.84	0.08
Two-factor ^d	1196.40	247	0.75	0.75	0.10
One-factor	1580.61	248	0.64	0.65	0.12

Notes: *N*=369

^aCombining the items measuring coworkers' upward mobility and prior job similarity into a single factor

^bCombining the items measuring perception of employability and turnover intention into a single factor

^cCombining the items measuring coworkers' upward mobility and perception of employability into a single factor

^dCombining the items measuring coworkers' upward mobility, prior job similarity, and perception of employability into a single factor

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	.52	.50	-								
2. Age	2.74	.92	-.07	-							
3. Tenure	2.94	1.32	.02	.65**	-						
4. Department	1.90	1.22	-.06	-.25**	-.24**	-					
5. Ownership	1.78	0.67	-.03	-.02	-.08	.01	-				
6. FEJS	3.59	.87	-.03	.01	-.10*	-.08	.07	-			
7. CUM	3.27	.70	0.5	.15**	.2**	-.11*	-.04	-.17**	-		
8. PJS	3.03	.81	.05	.05	.07	-.10	-.02	.07	.21**	-	
9. FEPE	3.12	.64	.18**	.04	.08	.03	.01	-.05	.29**	.17**	-
10. FETI	2.88	.91	.11*	-.004	.10*	.05	-.06	-.52**	.20**	.16**	.35**

Notes: FEJS, Focal employee's job satisfaction; CUM, Coworkers' upward mobility; PJS, Prior job similarity; FEPE, Focal employees' perception of employability; FETI, Focal employee's turnover intention. Gender: 1= male, 0= female. Age: 1=less than 20 years old, 2= 20-30 years old, 3= 31-40 years old, 4= 41-50 years old, and 5= over 50 years old. Tenure: 1= less than 1 year, 2= 1-2 years, 3= 3-5 years, 4= 6-10 years, and 5= over 10 years. $N=369$. * = $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed), ** = $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. Results of multiple regression analyses

	Dependent variable: FEPE			Dependent variable: FETI		
	M ₁	M ₂	M ₃	M ₄	M ₅	M ₆
Gender	.17**	.17**	.15**	.11*	.10*	.05
Age	.001	-.01	-.02	-.07	-.08	-.08
Tenure	.09	.04	.02	.08	.06	.05
Manufacturing	-.04	-.06	-.07	-.03	-.04	-.02
R&D	-.05	-.07	-.06	-.06	-.07	-.05
Sales	.08	.08	.10	-.01	-.01	-.04
State-owned	-.20	-.21	-.18	.18	.18	.25*
Private	-.23	-.22	-.20	.24	.24	.31*
Oversea	-.12	-.13	-.12	.11	.11	.15*
FEJS	-.02	.03	.02	-.51***	-.49***	-.50***
CUM		.29***	.28***		.11*	.02
FEPE						.33***
PJS			.11*			
CUM × PJS			.22***			
R ²	.06	.15	.20	.29	.31	.40
F	2.31*	5.29***	6.71***	14.85**	14.23***	19.47***

Notes: FEJS, Focal employee's job satisfaction; CUM, Coworkers' upward mobility; FEPE, Focal employees' perception of employability; PJS, Prior job similarity; FETI, Focal employee's turnover intention. $N=369$. *= $p<0.05$ (two-tailed), **= $p<0.01$ (two-tailed), ***= $p<0.001$ (two-tailed).

Table 4. Moderated mediating effect of prior job similarity

Level of Prior job similarity	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Path for low prior job similarity	.04	.03	-.02	.12
Path for high prior job similarity	.20	.04	.13	.30

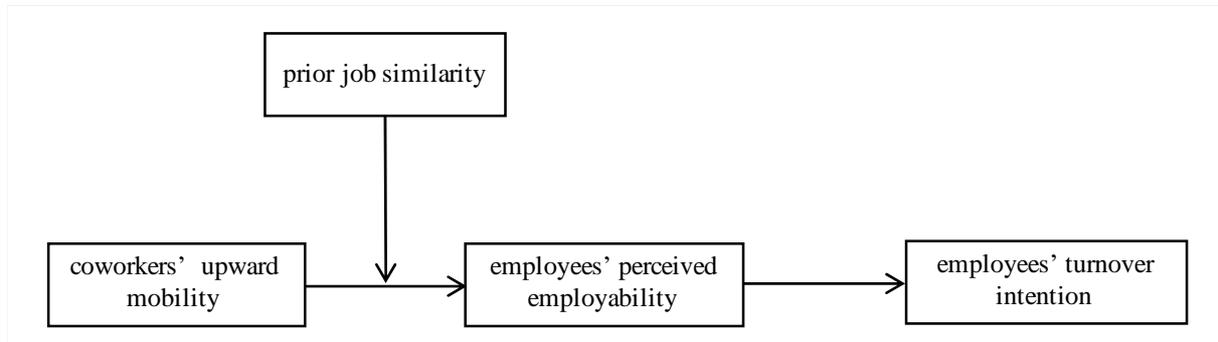


Figure 1. Conceptual model of this study

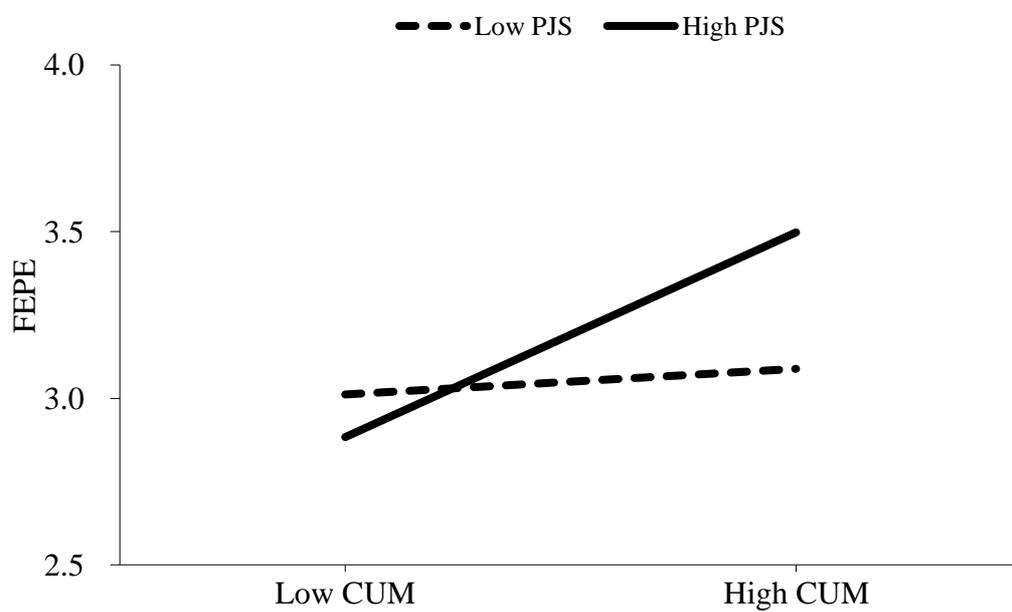


Figure 2. Moderating effect of prior job similarity on coworkers' upward mobility–focal employees' perception of employability relationship