

Are adaptable employees more likely to stay? Boundaryless careers and career ecosystem perspectives on career adaptability and turnover

ABSTRACT

Employees with higher career adaptability (CA) have been shown in previous research to be more likely to build high-quality social exchange relations with current employers, thereby displaying a lower intention to leave. Based on boundaryless careers and career ecosystem perspectives, this study aimed to challenge and enrich the extant understanding of this important question by examining the mixed effects of CA on turnover behavior. Results from a three-wave survey study with 179 Chinese employees show that after controlling the baseline turnover intention (Time 1), career adaptability (Time 1) predicted both affective commitment and relative deprivation at Time 2 (6 months after Time 1), which in turn produced opposite effects on voluntary turnover behavior at Time 3 (12 months after Time 1). Moreover, the boundaryless career mindset positively moderated the relationship between career adaptability and relative deprivation, and strengthened the indirect positive effect of career adaptability on turnover behavior via relative deprivation. These results offer a more comprehensive and balanced view of the mixed role of career adaptability in employees' turnover behavior, and carry important implications for human resource management.

Keywords: Career Adaptability, Career Ecosystem, Boundaryless Careers, Turnover Behavior

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The past three decades have witnessed a surge in research interest in career adaptability (CA), which consists of the psychological strengths of career concern (planning for future career possibilities), career control (making informed decisions and executing career plans), career curiosity (searching for new career opportunities), and career confidence (maintaining positive beliefs to achieve career aspirations) (Savickas, 1997, 2013). CA enables individuals to continuously engage in the cycle of learning and adaptation, thereby leading to positive work outcomes in organizational settings, such as work engagement and job performance (Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). Reciprocally, employers have been found to offer more recognition (Ohme & Zacher, 2015), support (Sibunruang, Garcia, & Tolentino, 2016; Zhu, Cai, Buchtel, & Guan, 2019), and career development opportunities to their adaptable employees (Yang et al., 2020). Owing to such mutually beneficial social exchange relationships between adaptable employees and their current organizations, researchers have generally accepted that CA should reduce employees' intention to leave, and the retention of adaptable employees should not be a big concern (Chan & Mai, 2015; Guan, Zhou, Jiang, & Zhou, 2015; Zhu et al., 2019).

However, meta-analytic research (Rudolph et al., 2017) has revealed that such a negative correlation between CA and employee turnover intention is rather weak (e.g., an absolute value of less than .20), which seems to challenge the above assumption. Moreover, research has shown that CA not only enables individuals adapt to the current environment but also to engage in career exploration behaviors (Guan et al., 2017) and develop external

marketability (Spurk, Kauffeld, Meinecke, & Ebner, 2016), which may motivate them to leave for external employment opportunities. The above analyses suggest that it may be premature to accept that adaptable employees are more likely to stay, and the failure to consider the potential positive effect of CA on employee turnover represents a significant research gap in the extant literature. This study aimed to address this research gap by integrating boundaryless careers and career ecosystem perspectives to analyze the double-edged effects of CA on employees' turnover behavior (Arthur, 1994; Baruch, Altman, & Tung, 2016; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Klein, Brinsfield, & Cooper, 2020).

As a metaphorical term, boundaryless careers denote career patterns that are less tied to the arrangements of one or few organizations (Arthur, 1994). A boundaryless career world provides opportunities for individuals to cross organizational, occupational, or geographical boundaries to achieve their career goals (Arthur, 1994; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012). In line with this notion, a boundaryless career ecosystem refers to an employment system that consists of loose but interdependent connections among individuals and entities, characterized by multi-foci psychological contracts and active interactions between career actors and a broader labor environment (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Kindsiko & Baruch, 2019). In such a career ecosystem, individuals not only engage in social exchanges with current employers (Nilforooshan & Salimi, 2016) but also actively cross organizational boundaries to explore new opportunities (Direnzo & Greenhaus, 2011; Erdogan, Tomás, Valls, & Gracia, 2018; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), develop new skills (Spurk et al., 2016), and use inter-organizational mobility as a strategy to boost their career success (Guan, Arthur, Khapova, Hall, & Lord, 2019). Given that adaptable employees are more capable of seizing

the valuable external opportunities they discover (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013), they may feel deprived of those desired and deserved career possibilities (Olson, Roese, Meen, & Robertson, 1995; Pettigrew, 1967; Runciman & Runciman, 1966). This feeling of relative deprivation may motivate adaptable employees to leave their current organizations to pursue alternative opportunities.

The above analyses suggest that CA enables employees to achieve positive social exchanges within current organizations, which often lead to high affective commitment and a low intention to leave (Klein et al., 2020; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001; Williams & Hazer, 1986). However, CA also promotes employees' awareness of external opportunities and comparisons of their current work to these opportunities, which may increase the feeling of relative deprivation and intention to leave (Olson et al., 1995; Pettigrew, 1967; Runciman & Runciman, 1966). We thus used affective commitment and relative deprivation as two key mediators to account for the mixed effects of CA on employee turnover behavior. Although CA enables individuals to take ownership of their careers and manage opportunities from both inside and outside their current organizations, not all adaptable individuals are motivated to focus on external opportunities, and the relative strengths of the mediation mechanisms depend on individuals' orientations toward boundary-crossing behaviors (Savickas, 2013). We thus proposed that boundaryless mindset, which refers to an individual's tendency to explore and navigate across career boundaries (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006). It serves as a key boundary condition that may strengthen the external-orientated path via relative deprivation and weaken the internal-orientated path via affective commitment. The theoretical model of this research is shown in Figure 1.

A three-wave survey study was conducted to examine these ideas, in which we measured the baseline turnover intention and CA at Time 1, affective commitment and relative commitment at Time 2 (6 months later), and voluntary turnover behavior as the outcome variable at Time 3 (12 months later). By doing this, we shifted the predominant focus on the effects of CA from inside the organization to a broader, boundaryless career ecosystem, which fosters a deeper understanding of the mixed role of CA in predicting turnover behavior. Moreover, by positioning the boundaryless career mindset as the moderator, we further demonstrated how adaptable employees' turnover decisions are shaped by their career orientations, thereby offering a comprehensive view of this process. In addition, by controlling for the effects of turnover intention at Time 1 and using actual turnover behavior as the outcome variable at Time 3, we offered a stringent examination of the unique effects of CA in predicting the mediators and turnover behavior (Cohen, Blake, & Goodman, 2016; Vandenberg & Nelson, 1999).

Career Adaptability and Employee Turnover: A Social Exchange Perspective

According to social exchange theory (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), the relationship between employees and organizations is maintained through continuous transactions of concrete resources (i.e., tangible resources that meet instrumental needs) or symbolic resources (i.e., resources that convey value beyond objective meaning). Each party needs to make investments in the other party and simultaneously has expectations about the benefits that can be procured from the other party. From mutual investment, this interdependent reciprocal relationship can develop into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitment (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001;

Whitener & Walz, 1993). In line with this perspective, employees with higher CA are likely to facilitate the positive exchange process with their organizations for the following reasons.

As a set of self-regulation strengths (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, and confidence), CA enables individuals to secure job opportunities that fit their personal values and qualifications (Guan et al., 2013), which is likely to promote positive work attitudes. In addition, employees with high CA are more capable of working toward role expectations by demonstrating high work engagement (Rossier, Zecca, Stauffer, Maggiori, & Dauwalder, 2012), utilizing their personal strengths for better performance (Ohme & Zacher, 2015; Tolentino et al., 2014), and continuously setting high standards for their work (Yang, Guan, Lai, She, & Lockwood, 2015). In addition, CA also enables employees to proactively engage in extra-role activities, such as skills development and network-building behaviors (Sibunruang et al., 2016; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015; Yang et al., 2020), which help them build mutual understanding with colleagues and gain more support from supervisors (Rezapour & Ardabili, 2017). As a result, employers tend to recognize adaptable employees' contributions and provide more support for their well-being and career development. Consistently, it has been found that adaptable employees experience higher supervisor-rated promotability (Sibunruang et al., 2016), more delegation from supervisors (Yang et al., 2015), and better career prospects (Yang et al., 2020).

The above discussions suggest that career-adaptable employees are more likely to feel committed to their organizations (Ito & Brotheridge, 2005; Rudolph et al., 2017). We thus proposed that affective commitment may serve as an important mediator to capture the social exchange mechanism between CA and employee turnover (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Ito

& Brotheridge, 2005). This is because employees' commitment is based on their perception of the exchange quality between themselves and the organization, such that the more favorable the exchange, the higher the level of commitment toward their organization (Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972; Whitener & Walz, 1993). Moreover, previous work (Rhoades et al., 2001; Williams & Hazer, 1986) has suggested that affective commitment serves as a more proximal predictor of turnover than other factors (e.g., personal and work characteristics, satisfaction, and perceived organizational support). Therefore, we proposed that:

Hypothesis 1: Affective commitment mediates the negative indirect effect of career adaptability on employees' turnover behavior.

Career Adaptability and Employee Turnover: A Career Ecosystem Perspective

The increasing risks of job insecurity and career uncertainties in a boundaryless career world require employees to explore and seize favorable opportunities both inside and outside their current organizations (Arthur, 1994; Drenzo & Greenhaus, 2011; Inkson et al., 2012). This trend is captured by the career ecosystem perspective (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Kindsiko & Baruch, 2019), which posits that the new generation of employees may need to build relations not only with current employers but also with external actors (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Given that CA includes the strengths of thinking about one's future career possibilities (career concern), exploring external information and opportunities (career curiosity), taking proactive action when necessary (career control), and having the confidence to meet challenges (career confidence), in the career ecosystem, career-adaptable employees are not only able to build positive social exchanges with current employers but also to effectively explore the external career environment. Consistently,

empirical research has shown that CA is positively related to job market knowledge (Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005), career planning, and career exploration (Rudolph et al., 2017).

In addition to exploring external opportunities, career-adaptable employees are more likely to realize that they deserve the desirable ones. CA is associated with higher levels of perceived control, confidence, optimism, and initiative, which are critical factors for individuals to successfully engage in the broader labor market and manage relevant challenges (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; O'Connell, McNeely, & Hall, 2008; Tolentino, Sedoglavich, Garcia, & Restubog, 2014). In addition, CA also enables employees to strengthen employability skills (de Guzman & Choi, 2013), develop career networks (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), and improve job search skills (Guan et al., 2013), which contribute to higher levels of external marketability (Spurk et al., 2016). As a result, CA may lead to the judgment that one wants and deserves better opportunities outside, which are two necessary preconditions of individuals' perceived deprivation (Olson et al., 1995).

Relative deprivation (RD) is a perception that one is deprived of something that one wants and deserves (Erdogan et al., 2018; Olson et al., 1995; Pettigrew, 1967; Runciman & Runciman, 1966; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). In this vein, career-adaptable employees tend to feel that they are deprived of the external potential, which can lead to dissatisfaction and resentment and further lead to self-directed behaviors to reduce such feelings (Hafer & Olson, 1993; Olson et al., 1995). Previous research has shown that RD predicts employee turnover above and beyond the effects of general work attitudes (Aquino, Griffeth, Allen, & Hom, 1997; Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, & Truxillo, 2011; Feldman &

Turnley, 2004). Accordingly, we proposed that although CA has a positive effect on affective commitment, it can also lead to increased levels of RD, which mediates the positive relationship between CA and turnover behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Relative deprivation mediates the positive indirect effect of career adaptability on employees' turnover behavior.

Career Adaptability and Employee Turnover: The Moderating Role of Boundaryless Career Mindset

Following the discussions above, we proposed two parallel but contradictory mediating processes, one with affective commitment from a social exchange perspective and the other with relative deprivation from a career ecosystem perspective, to account for the mixed effects of CA on employees' turnover behavior. However, as adaptable individuals are the main actors in the career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015), we could not merely analyze the above effects without considering their personal career orientations. As posited in career construction theory (Savickas, 2013), career orientations provide important guidance regarding the direction of career-developing efforts. The boundaryless career mindset can appropriately reflect ones' career orientation in this context because it is defined as ones' tendency to explore and navigate across career boundaries (Briscoe et al., 2006).

The boundaryless mindset, as a cross-boundary orientation, can motivate individuals to create and identify opportunities to work with employees from other organizations, such as in joint projects, partnership programs, or self-initiated work activities (Briscoe et al., 2006). It has also been found to positively predict employees' mobility across functions (Verbruggen, 2012; Volmer & Spurk, 2011). These findings suggest that a boundaryless

mindset encourages employees to use more external labor market strategies to develop their careers.

While CA carries the ability to explore, discover, and grasp potential opportunities both internally and externally, a boundaryless mindset provides critical directional guidance. Specifically, when employees score higher on this orientation, they are more willing to use their CA to discover and grasp external opportunities. Therefore, by applying CA, such employees promote RD and generate turnover intention and behavior. In contrast, adaptable employees who score lower in terms of the boundaryless mindset may not be motivated to reach out and seek opportunities across organizational boundaries, which may reduce the effects of CA on RD and result in less willingness to leave. For the path through affective commitment, the moderation direction would be the opposite.

Hypothesis 3: The boundaryless career mindset strengthens the relationship between career adaptability and relative deprivation (H3a) and produces the indirect effect of career adaptability on turnover behavior via relative deprivation (H3b).

Hypothesis 4: The boundaryless career mindset weakens the relationship between career adaptability and affective commitment (H4a) and produces the indirect effect of career adaptability on turnover behavior via affective commitment (H4b).

Insert Figure 1 here

Method

Procedure and Participants

Data were collected using a three-wave design from a Chinese IT service company in 2018 and 2019 because such companies are typically organizations urgently in need of keeping a human resource adaptability-stability balance in the career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015). An email invitation was sent to the employees in this organization. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants did not receive any financial rewards. To reduce common method bias, we adopted a time lag of 6 months between different waves of data collection. This time interval was selected for two reasons. First, a time span of 12 months is typical in organizational research because it enables researchers to capture actual turnover behavior, according to previous research (Carr, Boyar, & Gregory, 2008; Culpepper, 2011; Somers, 1999). Second, fewer extraneous changes are likely to occur within an organization during this time period compared to a longer one, thereby increasing explained variance (Price & Mueller, 1981). At Time 1, demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, income, organizational mobility, organizational tenure, and the number of promotions), baseline turnover intention (as a control variable), the independent variable (i.e., CA), and the moderator (i.e., the boundaryless career mindset) were measured. At Time 2 (6 months after Time 1), the mediating variables (i.e., affective commitment, RD) were measured. At Time 3 (12 months after Time 1), the employees' turnover data were obtained from the company's HR records.

At Time 1, 238 employees (112 males and 126 females) agreed to participate in this study. In terms of age, 0.4% were under 21, 18.1% were between 21 and 25, 37.4% were between 26 and 30, 23.1% were between 31 and 35, 12.2% were between 36 and 40, 6.7% were between 41 and 45, and the remaining 2.1% were between 46 and 50. The average

organizational tenure of the respondents as a whole was 5.72 years ($SD = 5.22$). The average number of promotions was 1.88 ($SD = 1.72$). At Time 2, 179 participants provided valid data. We compared demographic variables, Time 1 turnover intention, and all of the variables in our model (i.e., CA, affective commitment, RD, boundaryless career mindset, and turnover behavior), and the results of ANOVA did not suggest significant differences between our final sample ($N = 179$) and the sample that was dropped out ($N = 59$) on these variables. At Time 3, 29 employees had left the company, and the remaining had 209 stayed. As the data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no significant events that may have influenced the model tested in this study.

Measures

All items were originally developed in English. We employed translation and back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1980) to translate these items into Chinese. Responses were collected using a five-point scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Career Adaptability. The 12-item CA scale developed by Maggiori, Rossier, and Savickas (2017) was used in this study. A sample item was “I take responsibility for my actions.” The Chinese version of this scale has been used in previous research among Chinese respondents (Guan et al., 2018). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.92.

Affective Commitment. We used the six-item measurement developed by Allen and Meyer (1990) to measure affective commitment. A sample item was “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.” The Chinese version of this scale has shown good reliability and validity in previous research (Yang, Pu, & Guan, 2019). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.87.

Relative Deprivation. RD was measured using four items from previous research (Feldman & Turnley, 2004; Olson et al., 1995). A sample item to assess “wanting” was “To what extent do you want or need a better job situation than your present one?” In contrast, a sample item to assess “deserving” was “I deserve a better job situation than the present one.” Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.92.

Turnover Intention. Participants rated their turnover intention on the scale developed by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979). A sample item was “I often think about quitting.” This scale consists of three items on employees’ intention to quit their current organization. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.73.

Boundaryless Career Mindset. The boundaryless career mindset was measured using eight items from previous research (Briscoe et al., 2006). A sample item was “I would enjoy working on projects with people across many organizations.” Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.91.

Turnover Behavior. We collected data on employees’ turnover behavior by accessing the HR records (dummy coded variable, “1” = “voluntarily left the company”). The records showed that there were no cases of involuntary turnover during this period of time. This measure has been widely used in previous research on employee turnover.

Control Variables. Because prior meta-analysis and review articles have found that demographics (e.g., age and gender), work-related factors (e.g., salary, organizational tenure, and promotion) and inter-organizational mobility are associated with employees’ turnover issues, we included these variables as control variables in our analysis. Therefore, we measured participants’ gender (“1” = male, “2” = female), age (“1” = between 21 and 25, “2” =

= between 26 and 30, “3” = between 31 and 35, “4” = between 36 and 40, “5” = between 41 and 45, “6” = between 46 and 50, and “7” = 51 or above), organizational tenure (number of years working in the current organization), organizational mobility (“How many different organizations have you worked for?”), and number of promotions (“How many times have you been promoted since employment?”). The income measure reflects employees’ annual income in intervals of CNY50,000 (approximately GBP 5,500), for example, “1” = “CNY50,000-CNY100,000”, “2” = “CNY100,001-CNY150,000”, “3” = “CNY150,001-CNY200,000”... and “12” = “CNY600,001 or above.” Also, the baseline level of employees’ turnover intention was controlled for in the model for a more rigorous design to test the CA-turnover behavior relationship.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA was conducted to examine whether our proposed model could be supported by the current data. The fit indexes for the five-factor model ($N = 179$) are modest ($\chi^2 = 1139.44$, $df = 485$, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .84, TLI = .83, SRMR = .08). Given that the sample size is relatively small (i.e., $N < 250$; Hu & Bentler, 1999), as suggested by Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002), without modifying the model based on modification indices or estimating any measurement error covariances, after parceling the fit indexes are significantly improved ($\chi^2 = 169.33$, $df = 94$, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, SRMR = .04).

Therefore, the proposed model shows acceptable fit for further analysis.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

As displayed in Table 1, the correlations among core variables provided primary support

for the hypothesized model.

Insert Table 1 here

Tests of Hypotheses

The results of the hierarchical analyses are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

The bootstrapping method of Process Model 4 in SPSS proposed by Hayes (2013) was conducted to test the proposed mediation effect of CA in predicting turnover behavior through affective commitment and RD. By setting the sampling times at 5000 and the confidence intervals at 95% within Model 4, the mediation effects of affective commitment (*estimate* = $-.68$, 95% *CI* = $[-1.74, -.37]$) and RD (*estimate* = $.59$, 95% *CI* = $[.22, 1.63]$) were both statistically significant. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported as the predicting turnover behavior. The results of the bootstrap analyses are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 here

To further examine the moderated mediation effect, we ran a bootstrap analysis using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2013), setting the sample times at 5000 and the confidence intervals at 95%. The results of the moderated mediation model are listed in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 here

As shown in Table 4, the interaction term of CA and boundaryless career mindset had a statistically significant effect on RD ($estimate = .14$, 95% $CI = [.01, .27]$), supporting H3a. Specifically, simple slope tests revealed that the relationship between CA and RD was positive and statistically significant ($estimate = .42$, 95% $CI = [.16, .69]$) when the boundaryless career mindset was higher (1SD above the mean) but was not statistically significant ($estimate = .06$, 95% $CI = [-.15, .26]$) when the boundaryless career mindset was lower (1SD below the mean). Moreover, the moderated indirect effect of CA on turnover behavior via RD was statistically significant ($estimate = .22$, 95% $CI = [.02, .70]$), supporting H3b. Specifically, simple slope tests revealed that the mediation effect of RD on the relationship between CA and turnover behavior was positive and statistically significant ($estimate = .67$, 95% $CI = [.17, 1.97]$) when the boundaryless career mindset was higher (1SD above the mean) but was not statistically significant ($estimate = .09$, 95% $CI = [-.24, .53]$) when the boundaryless career mindset was lower (1SD below the mean). The interaction effects are illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here

Nevertheless, the interaction term of CA and boundaryless career mindset did not have a statistically significant effect on affective commitment ($estimate = .08$, 95% $CI =$

[$-.04, .20$]), undermining H4a. The moderated indirect effect of CA on turnover behavior through affective commitment was also not statistically significant ($estimate = -.15$, 95% $CI = [-.56, .06]$), undermining H4b.

Discussion

The present study revealed a dilemma faced by contemporary organizations, as hiring adaptable employees means bearing the risk of adaptable brain drain. In the extant literature, CA has been conceptualized as a critical resource for high-quality social exchange that prevents employees from leaving. Drawing upon the perspectives of boundaryless careers and career ecosystem, this study supported past studies by proving that CA had a negative indirect effect on turnover behavior through the mediation of affective commitment. However, CA was also proved to positively predict turnover behavior through the mediation of RD. Additionally, a higher boundaryless career mindset was found to strengthen the relationship between CA and RD as well as the indirect mediation effect of RD on the relationship between CA and turnover behavior. These findings carry important implications for future research and for organizations wishing to maintain a proper adaptability-stability balance.

Theoretical Implications

This study examined the influence of CA on employees' turnover using a rigorous design. Specifically, we collected objective data of employment status from the target company as the indicator of turnover behavior. Previous studies examined turnover intention rather than actual turnover (Chan & Mai, 2015; Chan, Boyar, & Gregory, 2016; Dong, Zheng, & Wang, 2020; Guan et al., 2015; Ito & Brotheridge, 2005; Zhu et al., 2019), with the assumption that leaving intention serves equally well as both a proxy for and a predictor of

employees' actual turnover behavior. However, turnover intention and actual turnover are two distinct concepts, so the intention–behavior relation has varied widely across studies (Cohen et al., 2016; Vandenberg & Nelson, 1999). By measuring the behavioral indicator, our study implied a cause-effect linkage between CA and turnover issues, as the inverse relationship is not valid; that is, turnover behavior will not occur before the measure of CA. Given this research design, our study made the following three key contributions.

First, the mediating effect of affective commitment between CA and turnover behavior provided further verification of previous research findings in the context of a boundless career ecosystem. Extant research has empirically supported the negative effect of CA on employees' turnover (Chan et al., 2016; Klein et al., 2020; Ito & Brotheridge, 2005; Williams & Hazer, 1986), and most studies have interpreted it from the social exchange perspective, using either instrument-based mediators (e.g., perceived organizational support; Zhu et al., 2019) or symbolic-based mediators (e.g., job satisfaction; Cullen, Edwards, Casper, & Gue, 2014; Rezapour & Ardabili, 2017). We confirmed the mediation effect of affective commitment (*estimate* = $-.68$, 95% *CI* = $[-1.74, -.37]$), and thus provided a strong explanation for this relationship (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Another implication is that the current research contributed a new possibility regarding the effect of CA on turnover, namely that CA enables employees to develop their careers by casting their sights outside their current organizations, leading to subjective evaluations of deprivation and actual turnover behavior. In fact, a large body of existing research only supports a one-sided view of the relationship while paying little attention to the effects of CA outside the current organization (to the best of our knowledge, for CA-external

employability, see Spurk et al., 2016; for CA-perceived over-qualification, see Dong et al., 2020). Hence, our study pictured a comprehensive model by broaden the focus to a wider career ecosystem through both internal-orientated and external-orientated mechanisms. In addition, turnover is the change of employment among different organizations, so it is just one form of career mobility. Future research should continue to broaden the focus to the effects of CA on other forms of mobility, such as job change, industry change, and occupation change (Ng & Feldman, 2007).

We also tested whether the relative strengths of internal- and external-oriented mediating mechanisms can be activated or deactivated by individual career orientations. The results indicate that when individuals have strong tendencies to explore career opportunities and develop competencies across boundaries, the choice to leave becomes salient owing to the feeling of relative deprivation. In contrast, the moderating hypothesis related to the internal pathway was rejected. These results suggest that a boundaryless career mindset is more like a facilitating factor that influences the application of CA for career transition and/or change, rather than a factor that influences the application of CA within the organization.

From the perspectives of boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994; Drenzo & Greenhaus, 2011; Guan et al., 2019) and career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Kindsiko & Baruch, 2019), in addition to individual factors (e.g., boundaryless career mindset), there are other factors that may also contribute to organizational mobility decisions and serve as important moderators in the CA-turnover relationship. For example, CA seems to motivate employees to leave when industry growth occurs and when there are alternative opportunities emerging in the external labor market. At

the societal level, CA is likely to motivate employees to leave when the support from social institutions (e.g., generous social welfare) is sufficient to reduce the associated costs of mobility. However, labor market situations, such as segregation and discrimination (Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009), long project timescales, and loose inter-firm connections (Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000), can weaken the CA-turnover relationship. These important questions need to be examined in future research.

Practical implications

This study investigated competing mediating processes via affective commitment and RD, explaining how CA can be a double-edged sword for organizations. HR managers need to be aware of the price they have to pay in exchange for an internally adaptable workforce. Specifically, HR managers are suggested to strengthen the attractiveness of internal labor markets while preventing employees from feeling relatively deprived. To consolidate employees' affective commitment with the current organization, HR managers can incorporate higher-level interventions (e.g., shared values/climate, social communities) into HR practices (Snell & Morris, 2021). It is also necessary for organizations to reduce employees' feelings of RD by promoting organizational justice (e.g., distributive and procedural justice; Folger & Martin, 1986), empowerment (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009), and delegation (Yang et al., 2015).

The moderating effects of the boundaryless career mindset further capture the dynamic context in which the pros and cons of career adaptability become more relevant for organizations. In particular, adaptable employees holding a strong boundaryless career mindset will be more likely to feel relatively deprived and choose to leave. Thus, HR

managers need to pay more attention to these employees and try to strengthen the current employer brand while mitigating the pulling power of external ones. One recommendation is to create more challenges for adaptable employees by activating intra-organization work redesigns, such as rotational assignments, task forces, virtual teams, and project work (Snell & Morris, 2021). In a turbulent business environment where adaptable employees are critical for organizational success, HR managers should pay attention to these issues in order to maintain the balance between adaptability and stability (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011).

Limitations and future directions

Despite these theoretical and practical implications, this study still had several limitations. First, all of our variables except for turnover behavior were measured through the self-report method, which may have led to common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, we adopted a multi-wave research design and collected data for different variables at different times to deal with this issue. Besides, most constructs in this study, such as CA, mediators, and the boundaryless mindset, were developed to capture individual perceptions or subjective evaluations, so are suitable to be measured by self-ratings. Nevertheless, future research should corroborate the findings in this study by collecting data from different sources.

Previous research has suggested that as individuals' career construction is a dynamic process (Guan et al., 2017), there may be reciprocal relations among the variables examined in this study. Therefore, we included demographic variables (i.e., age and gender), work-related factors (i.e., organizational tenure), career success indicators (i.e., promotion and

salary), and inter-organizational mobility as control variables to examine the unique effect of CA on employees' turnover. Besides, as employees who have a higher turnover intention may consider themselves as suffering from deprivation at the hands of their current employers and as having higher CA, we included turnover intention as a control variable to examine the effect of CA on employees' actual turnover behavior. Despite these remedies, future studies are suggested to adopt more rigorous methods, such as longitudinal or experimental designs, to further examine whether the relations among these variables are causal or reciprocal.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the boundaryless careers and career ecosystem frameworks, our study results indicate that managing adaptable employees and turnover is a more complex process than usually discussed. CA negatively predicted turnover behavior through affective commitment. It also positively predicted turnover behavior through RD, especially when individuals had a higher boundaryless career mindset. The findings advance our understanding of the link between CA and turnover by uncovering a more comprehensive picture of the underlying mechanisms and delineating the boundary conditions. The current research has important implications for career adaptability and career mobility research, as well as for managing organizational human resources with an adaptability-stability balance.

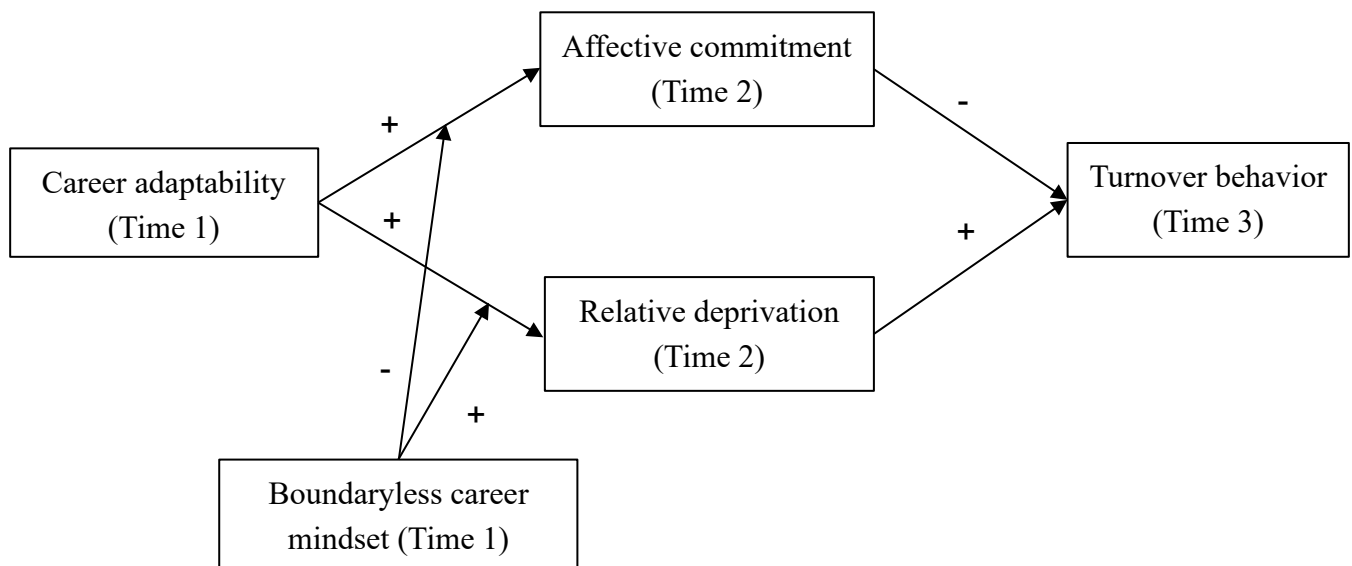


Figure 1. The proposed model.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Coefficients, and Inter-Correlations among Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	1.53	0.50	-											
2. Age	3.57	1.24	-0.08	-										
3. Promotion	1.88	1.72	-0.17**	0.19**	-									
4. Tenure	5.72	5.22	-0.06	0.66** *	0.15*	-								
5. Organizational Mobility	2.29	1.23	.03	0.00	0.27** *	-0.22* *	-							
6. Income	1.71	1.27	-0.29***	0.03	0.15*	0.17**	-0.09	-						
7. Turnover Intention T1	2.42	0.76	0.15*	-0.12	-0.11	-0.07	0.04	-0.09	(0.73)					
8. Career Adaptability T1	4.10	0.55	-0.21**	0.12	0.15*	0.01	-0.02	0.03	-0.19**	(0.92)				
9. Affective Commitment T2	3.93	0.70	-0.20**	0.35** *	0.21**	0.22**	-0.07	0.07	-0.36** *	0.47** *	(0.87)			

Table 2

Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Career Adaptability on Affective Commitment, Relative Deprivation, and Turnover Behavior

Predictors	Affective Commitment (T2)		Relative Deprivation (T2)		Turnover Behavior (T3)	
<i>Control Variables</i>						
Gender	−0.06(−0.08)	−0.06(−0.08)	−0.02(−0.02)	0.01(0.02)	−0.10(0.25)	−0.28(0.29)
Age	0.15(0.21)*	0.15(0.21)*	−0.11(−0.14)	−0.11(−0.14)	0.09(0.35)	0.78(0.46)
Income	−0.05(−0.06)		−0.00(−0.00)	−0.02(−0.03)	0.29(0.24)	0.40(0.27)
Promotion	0.06(0.08)	0.05(0.07)	0.07(0.09)	0.03(0.04)	−0.13(0.28)	−0.05(0.29)
Tenure	0.04(0.05)	0.04(0.06)	0.05(0.06)	0.07(0.09)	−0.43(0.39)	−0.71(0.46)
Organizational Mobility	−0.04(−0.05)		−0.07(−0.09)	−0.03(−0.04)	−0.02(0.25)	0.03(0.29)
Turnover Intention	−0.16(−0.25)***	−0.16(−0.26)***	0.16(0.22)**	0.13(0.18)**	0.54(0.24)*	0.12(0.28)
<i>Independent Variable</i>						
Career Adaptability	0.26(0.38)***	0.25(0.37)***	0.29(0.38)***	0.17(0.22)**	−0.10(0.22)	−0.06(0.32)
<i>Moderator (T1)</i>						
Boundaryless Mindset		0.01(0.02)		0.22(0.30)**		
<i>The Interaction Term</i>						
CA*BM		0.06(0.09)		0.11(0.15)*		
<i>Mediators (T2)</i>						
Affective Commitment						−1.83(0.50)***
Relative Deprivation						1.58(0.44)***
R ²	0.39	0.40	0.19	0.29	0.10	0.37
R ² change		0.01		0.10		0.27

Note. N = 179. T = Time. Unstandardized coefficient estimates with standard errors were reported.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3

Results of the Mediation Model

	Est.	LL 95%CI	UL 95%CI
<i>Direct Effects of Affective Commitment or Relative Deprivation on Turnover Behavior:</i>			
Affective Commitment	-1.82	-2.80	-0.85
Relative Deprivation	1.58	0.72	2.44
<i>Indirect Effects of Career Adaptability on Turnover Behavior via the Two Mediators:</i>			
Affective Commitment	-0.68	-1.74	-0.37
Relative Deprivation	0.59	0.22	1.63

Note. $N = 179$. The results of bootstrap analyses were reported after controlling for age, gender, income, organizational mobility, tenure, promotion, and Time 1 turnover intention. Est. = estimate; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; CI = confidence interval.

Table 4

Results for the Moderated Mediation Model

Predictors	Affective Commitment	Relative Deprivation	Turnover Behavior
<i>Interactional Term of Career Adaptability and Boundaryless Mindset on Mediators:</i>			
Career Adaptability * Boundaryless Mindset	0.08 [-0.04, 0.20]		
Career Adaptability * Boundaryless Mindset		0.14 [0.01, 0.27]	
<i>Conditional Relationships between Career Adaptability and Relative Deprivation at Values of Boundaryless Mindset:</i>			
High Boundaryless Mindset (+SD)		0.42 [0.16, 0.69]	
Low Boundaryless Mindset (-SD)		0.06 [-0.15, 0.26]	
<i>Moderated Indirect Effect of Career Adaptability on Turnover Behavior via Affective Commitment and Relative Deprivation:</i>			
Affective Commitment (T2)			-0.15 [-0.56, 0.06]
Relative Deprivation (T2)			0.22 [0.02, 0.70]
<i>Conditional Indirect Relationships between Career Adaptability and Turnover Behavior via Relative Deprivation at Values of Boundaryless Mindset:</i>			
High Boundaryless Mindset (+SD)			0.67 [0.17, 1.97]
Low Boundaryless Mindset (-SD)			0.09 [-0.24, 0.53]

Note. $N = 179$. The results of bootstrap analyses were reported after controlling for age, gender, income, organizational mobility, organizational tenure, promotion, and Time 1 turnover intention.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

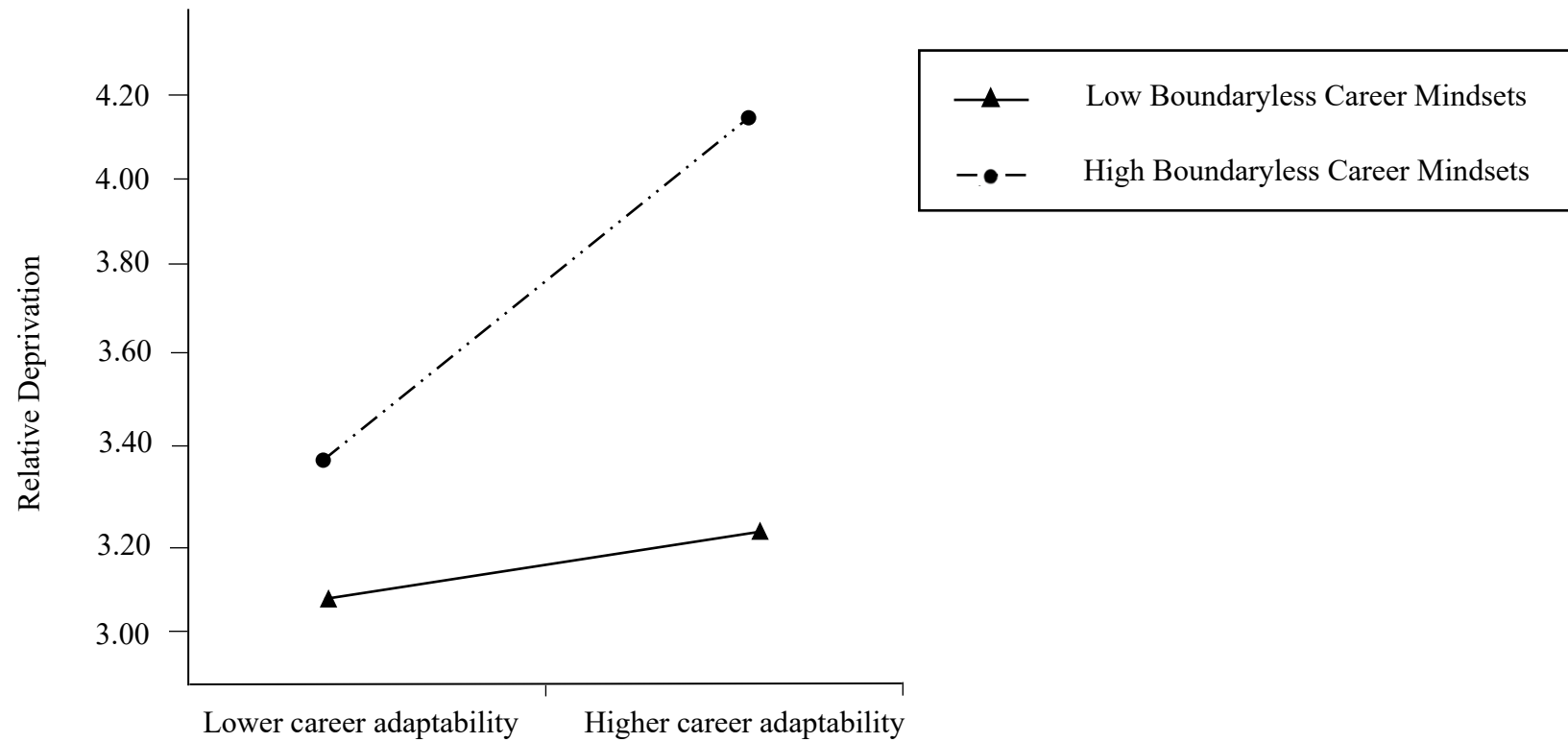


Figure 2. The interaction effect of career adaptability and the boundaryless career mindset on relative deprivation.