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**Why and When Job Insecurity Hinders Employees' Taking Charge Behavior:
The Role of Flexibility and Work-based Self-esteem**

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Abstract

Job insecurity is negatively associated with employees' extra-role behavior. Studies of this negative impact often use a social exchange or stress-strain perspective to explain how job insecurity impairs employees' extra-role behavior. This study offers an alternative account. Based on a conservation of resources perspective, the authors propose that job insecurity denotes a threat of loss of resources, which will motivate individuals to focus on how to protect what they have and reduce further loss. Such conservation of resources will limit one's flexibility, or the ability to consider alternatives and change a course of action in response to environmental changes, and thus undermine employees' extra-role behavior for pursuing constructive changes at work (i.e., taking charge). The authors also propose that the impact of job insecurity on flexibility can be more detrimental to employees higher in work-based self-esteem (i.e., domain-specific self-esteem) due to the experience of self-concept dissonance. The results, obtained from 188 employees in 19 teams of a manufacturing company, supported the hypotheses, while mechanisms suggested by a social exchange perspective (i.e., felt obligation to organizations) and a stress-strain perspective (i.e., vigor) were taken into account. This investigation extends understanding of how and why job insecurity influences employees' work behavior, as well as who is most vulnerable to job insecurity.

Keywords: job insecurity, conservation of resources theory, flexibility, proactivity, self-esteem

INTRODUCTION

The rapidly changing nature of work in the global environment implies that organizations increasingly function as the “nexus of contracts” that solicit labor on demand for each task, often using online platforms (Davis, 2016). Work intensification, multi-tasking, and the reliance on robots or digital agents to perform many jobs previously performed by humans also leads the business practice (Bohle, Quinlan, & Mayhew, 2001; Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Quinlan & Bohle, 2009). According to the report from International Labor Organization, about 470 million people are currently unemployed or underemployed, occupying 13% of the global workforce. Such trends suggest that full-time employment is decreasing, and a threat of loss of employment emerges. Accordingly, workers’ expectations to the contrary likely cause them to experience anxiety or insecurity. Job insecurity, a perceived sense of uncertainty in maintaining desired continuity in a job situation (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984), can be especially detrimental to employees’ organizational contributions. Studies show that insecure employees tend to exhibit poorer job performance (Schreurs, Van Emmerik, Günter, & Germeys, 2012; Staufenbiel & König, 2010), reduced job satisfaction and affective commitment (Debus, Probst, König, & Kleinmann, 2012; Hewlin, Kim, & Song, 2016; Staufenbiel & König, 2010), and increased leaving intentions (Huang, Wellman, Ashford, Lee, & Wang, 2017; Staufenbiel & König, 2010). Recent studies also indicate that job insecurity can impair employees’ extra-role behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Lam, Liang, Ashford, & Lee, 2015), voice (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2010; Schreurs, Guenter, Jawahar, & De Cuyper, 2015; Sverke & Hellgren, 2001), or innovation (Van Hootehem, Niesen, & De Witte, 2019).

To explain the negative impact of job insecurity on extra-role behaviors, most scholars adopt a social exchange or stress–strain perspective to describe the link between job insecurity and employees’ outcomes (for a review, see Lee, Huang, & Ashford, 2018; Shoss, 2017). For example, drawing on social exchange theory, Lam et al. (2015) argue that when an organization cannot provide sufficient job security, employees engage in less OCB, because they do not feel obligated to go extra miles to reciprocate the organization. The stress–strain

perspective views job insecurity as a hindrance stressor that is unnecessarily stressful and would potentially impede personal growth and goal attainment (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005), which likely induces unfavorable strain reactions that interferes with employee's contribution to their organizations (e.g., Staufenbiel & König, 2010; Van Hootegem et al., 2019). Although both perspectives explain why job insecurity may result in negative consequences, neither consider the impact of job insecurity on damaging employees' capabilities of effectively responding to the environment, a different mechanism to explain why job insecurity can undermine extra-role behavior at work, especially those calling for such capacities such as proactive work behavior or change-oriented behavior (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007; Marinova, Peng, Lorinkova, Van Dyne, & Chiaburu, 2015).

Drawing on a conservation of resources perspective (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989), we argue that job insecurity will undermine one's flexibility, or the ability to consider alternatives and change a course of action in response to environmental changes (cf. Martin & Rubin, 1995; Nadkarni & Herrmann 2010). The theory contends that when people perceive a threat of loss, they tend to protect what they have and scale back on investing their resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Following this, we propose that employees when experiencing job insecurity, are motivated to maintain their jobs or benefits associated with the jobs. Such resource conservation can undermine one's flexibility in their thinking and actions. Lacking flexibility will impair employees' behaviors to bring about constructive changes at work, a behavior that builds on employees' ability to consider alternatives and act upon opportunities (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001). In this study, we focus on taking charge behavior (Morrison & Phelps, 1999), a change-oriented behavior aiming to improve work procedure and effectiveness in the organizations (Parker & Collins, 2010; Choi, 2007; Marinova et al., 2015).

Conservation of resources theory also suggests that people only take actions to protect or obtain resources they value (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). As people can value their jobs or resources related to the jobs differently, the perceived threat of resource loss owing to job insecurity can vary across individuals. To capture such individual

differences effect, we focus on work-based self-esteem, a domain-specific self-esteem describing how one regards her/himself as capable, significant, and worthy at work (cf., Brockner, 1988; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Schwalbe, 1988). We propose that employees with higher work-based self-esteem will be more vulnerable to job insecurity than those who score lower on this form of self-esteem, and become less flexible in mastering demands and changes in the work environment. As people tend to maintain a positive self-view about themselves (Sedikides, & Strube, 1997), we expect that job insecurity brings a bigger threat to those higher in work-based self-esteem, because losing one's job means that they will lose an important source to maintain a positive view. Following this logic, when experiencing job insecurity, those high in work-based self-esteem will conserve current resources to address the potential loss, instead of paying attention to alternatives to make flexible and constructive changes at work..

This study brings three contributions to job insecurity literature. First, we propose a conservation of resources perspective to explain why job insecurity can undermine employees' taking charge behaviors. Drawing on the principle that people tend to focus on how to protect resources they current have (Hobfoll et al., 2018), our study suggests that job insecurity can narrow one's focus and reduce one's capability to think and behave flexibly, preventing employees to identify and take opportunities to bring about changes. This explanation is different from a social exchange perspective concerning employees' willingness to invest extra effort to the organizations and a stress-strain perspective concerning employees' self-regulatory energy to sustain extra-role behaviors.

Second, by identifying flexibility as a predictor for employees' taking charge behavior, our study highlights the importance of having capability to consider alternatives and change a course of action to enable employees to find and act upon opportunities to bring about changes. Although being flexible has been recognized as a key factor for employees' proactive behavior (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001), studies so far has not empirically examined its function on employees' proactive behavior. Our study not only provides evidence to support

such a proposition but further indicate situations (e.g., job insecurity) that could undermine employees' flexibility and thus proactive behavior.

Third, our examination on the moderating effect of work-based self-esteem brings further discussion on how people vary in their self-evaluations can respond differently to job insecurity. Studies on job insecurity have examined moderating effect of different self-evaluation concepts, such as trait self-esteem (Mäkikangas, & Kinnunen, 2003), organization-based self-esteem (Hui & Lee, 2000), performance-based self-esteem (Blom, Richter, Hallsten, & Svedberg, 2015), and job self-efficacy (Schreurs, Van Emmerik, Notelaers, & De Witte, 2010). These studies differ in their theoretical perspectives for how self-evaluations can lead to different reactions to job insecurity. While some studies regard higher self-evaluations as personal resources that can help employees to overcome negative impacts of job insecurity, other studies, like the current one, suggest higher self-evaluations indicate those who are vulnerable to job insecurity due to its threat to positive self-views. Empirically, mixed findings are found across studies or even within the same study but on different variables (Hui & Lee, 2000). Our perspective and examination on the moderating effect of work-based self-esteem offers a potential account to the mixed moderating roles of self-evaluations by evidencing that contingent self-evaluation would make employees to focus more on protecting what they have and thus likely to engage in behaviors that help to achieve the goal rather than to go extra miles.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Job Insecurity and Taking Charge: Mediating Role of Flexibility

We expect that job insecurity relates negatively to flexibility for several reasons. Conservation of resources theory proposes that when people perceive a threat of resources loss, they will be motivated to retain their existing resources and to reduce further resources loss (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Having a job can bring valuable resources to individuals such as accumulation of experiences, skill proficiency, steady income, status, and recognition. While insecurity perceptions in a workplace indicate high uncertainty (Huang et al., 2013), ambiguous situations are usually aversive and resource-consuming that it induces

efforts striving to reduce it (Festinger, 1957; Hogg, 2000; Wang, Lu, & Siu, 2015). As such, when individuals experience job insecurity, they will perceive the potential loss of resources derived from the jobs, and will strive to protect those resources by proactively focusing on actions or strategies, such as impression management tactics and delivering higher in-role performance that may lower job insecurity (Huang, Zhao, Niu, Ashford, & Lee, 2013), to keep the jobs. With attentional resources mainly focused on actions and strategies to reduce the uncertainty (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Huang et al., 2013), individuals are less likely to consider alternatives that could bring about more uncertain consequences. As such, job insecurity will refrain individuals from thinking widely and enacting actions that will deviate their focus from obtaining certainty. Second, job insecurity can induce negative emotions, such as anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & Harris, 2014; Vander Elst, Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2014). As negative emotions will constrict one's cognitive resources and narrow their attention to threats they are facing (Hallion & Ruscio, 2011; Rowe, Hirsh, & Anderson, 2007), employees experiencing job insecurity will be less flexible to consider a wide range of information and thus take actions. Third, job insecurity signals a risky situation in the workplace in which employees feel helplessness and that control over one's fate is threatened (Huang et al., 2013; Hui & Lee, 2000). Such a feeling can constrain one's flexibility as the individual will be hesitant and unconfident to deal with information and anticipate consequences of their actions in an uncertain environment.

Lacking flexibility in turn will impede employees' taking charge behavior. First, people with constricted flexibility cannot update their mindsets about the changing environment and might not adopt a problem-solving orientation (Martin, Cayanus, McCutcheon, & Maltby, 2003). As taking charge entails bringing about future changes (Bindl, Parker, Totterdell, & Hagger-Johnson, 2012), which requires an anticipatory, change-oriented focus, inflexibility thus might limit the basic awareness that the situation needs to change, thwarting taking charge behaviors. Second, inflexible employees aim to avoid unfamiliar situations and prefer primitive modes of thinking (Escrigtena, 2005; Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998). To the

extent that taking charge requires new idea generation about improved procedures (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006), inflexibility is problematic in inducing taking charge behavior, because it reduces divergent thinking and adaptive attempts to embrace unexpected ideas. Inflexible employees who are less receptive to environmental cues and new messages both cognitively and behaviorally, cannot find a constructive way to move forward. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Flexibility mediates the relationship between job insecurity and taking charge behaviors.

Moderating Effect of Work-based Self-esteem

The threat of resources loss due to job insecurity can vary across individuals. Conservation of resources theory proposes that individuals “strive to obtain, retain, foster, and protect those things they centrally value” (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018, p.106). As people likely value their jobs differently, job insecurity can induce a greater threat of resources loss for some people but not others. Following this, we focus on individual differences in work-based self-esteem, a domain specific self-esteem regarding one’s self-evaluations at work (cf., Brockner, 1988; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Schwalbe, 1988). We argue that employees higher in work-based self-esteem will be more sensitive to threat of job loss because if they lose their jobs, they will lose important source to maintain their positive view. For those lower in work-based self-esteem, losing jobs may not affect their self-views significantly because work did not help much for maintaining a positive self-view to them. Due to such differences, when facing job insecurity, employees higher in work-based self-esteem will have a stronger motivation to preserve what they have and become less flexible than their counterparts. In brief, we argue that job insecurity can be more detrimental to employees’ flexibility and thus taking charge behavior for those high, versus those low, in work-based self-esteem.

As a basic human tendency, people tend to maintain a positive self-view about themselves (Sedikides, & Strube, 1997). As employees higher in work-based self-esteem tend to perceive themselves as being competent, significant, and valuable at work, their jobs

provide an important source for them to maintain a positive self-view. When they experience job insecurity, they will perceive a threat to their positive self-view and seek to protect their jobs as it is the way to protect their positive self-view. Such a motivation will lead them to focus on how to preserve their jobs rather than pay attention to other information and react accordingly. In addition, those higher in work-based self-esteem also suffer a great self-concept dissonance (Bowling, Eschleman, Wang, Krikendall, & Alarcon, 2010; Bramel, 1968; Nadler & Fisher, 1986) between their positive self-evaluations at work and the perception of being redundant. A greater self-concept dissonance will then make an individual more self-focused and ego-defensive (Greenwald & Ronis, 1978), instead of paying attention to opportunities and alternatives that are not relevant to protect their positive self-views.

In contrast, employees lower in work-based self-esteem tend to experience self-doubt and have unfavorable evaluations about their competence and values at work. As they cannot build and maintain positive views based on their performance and activities at work, job insecurity will have less threat to their self-concepts. In addition, these employees are less likely to experience self-concept dissonance as those higher in work-based self-esteem would have. Due to the unfavorable self-evaluations, these employees may have expected to leave the jobs voluntarily or nonvoluntarily. They could even use the negative feelings and implications of job insecurity, such as the feeling of depressed and perceived failure (see Lee et al., 2018, for a review), to verify their negative self-views (Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992). We thus anticipate that job insecurity will have less impact on employees' flexibility among those lower in work-based self-esteem than their counterparts. In line with our reasoning, Blom, Richter, Hallsten, and Svedberg (2015) reported that job insecurity induced stronger burnout and depressive symptoms among employees higher, versus lower, in self-esteem based on their work performance specifically. We propose:

Hypothesis 2: Work-based self-esteem moderates the relationship between job insecurity and flexibility; when work-based self-esteem is high, the negative relationship between job insecurity and flexibility is stronger than when work-based self-esteem is low.

The Moderated Mediation Model

We propose a moderated mediation model by suggesting that job insecurity can undermine employees' flexibility, especially among those higher in work-based self-esteem, and therefore their taking charge behavior. Building on the principle of conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) that threat of resources loss can engender resource-protection motivation that narrows individuals' attention and avoids engage in activities that consume but not protect resources, we propose a mediation process from job insecurity, via flexibility, to taking charge behavior. Further, drawing on the principle that people strive to protect resources they value (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we propose that the impact of job insecurity can induce stronger resource-protection motivation among those higher in work-based self-esteem than their counterparts. Consequently, the mediating mechanism we proposed will be more prominent for those higher in work-based self-esteem than those lower in work-based self-esteem. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 3: Work-based self-esteem moderates the indirect effect of job insecurity on taking charge behaviors through flexibility; when work-based self-esteem is high, the indirect effect is stronger than when work-based self-esteem is low.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

We conducted three data collection waves, with two-week intervals, in a manufacturing company in southwest China. We adopted the two-week intervals because it is long enough for respondents to observe or perceive the impacts of job insecurity, and it is not too long in case that they forget the perception they have ever possessed in mind. In the first wave, employees provided information about their demographics, job insecurity, work-based self-esteem, and proactive personality. Two weeks later, in the second wave, we distributed questionnaires to employees who completed the first wave and asked them to rate their flexibility, felt obligation, and vigor, so that we could control for the mediation mechanisms suggested by the social exchange and stress-strain perspectives. After another two weeks, supervisors reported each employee's taking charge behaviors, in a third survey wave. By

assigning corresponding numbers to employees, we matched the responses from employees and their supervisors.

We randomly selected 200 employees from the name list provided by the company's human resource manager, who also briefed employees about the study purpose and survey procedures. All respondents received a cover letter, highlighting the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey, along with the questionnaire and a return envelope. Each participant who finished the questionnaires received a high-quality pen as a gift. In the first wave, we received 194 completed responses, yielding a response rate of 97.0%. Two weeks later, 190 employees returned their finished responses, with a response rate of 97.9%. In the third wave, the 190 employees' 20 supervisors were invited. After deleting incomplete dyads, we retained 188 employees and 19 supervisors. Of the 188 employees, 58.0% were men, the average age was 30.47 years, and their average organizational tenure was 7.15 years. In terms of education, 87% of respondents held a high school degree or attended college but did not receive their bachelor's degrees, and 12.8% of them had earned a bachelor's or post-graduate degree. Among the 19 supervisors, 54.8% were men, with an average age of 35.41 years, and their average organizational tenure was 12.54 years.

Measures

The measures for this study were translated and back-translated to Chinese, following commonly used procedures (Brislin, 1980). We also consulted several employees in the surveyed company to ensure the questionnaires' suitability for the research context (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). All measures used 5-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Job insecurity

We used a 10-item scale developed by Oldham, Kulik, Stepina, and Ambrose (1986), which has been applied previously to Chinese samples (Huang et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2015) and offers good scale validity. Sample items included, "My job is not a secure one," and "If this organization were facing economic problems, my job would be the first to go." The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .86.

Work-based self-esteem

We measure work-based self-esteem by revising the 10-item scale of organization-based self-esteem (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989). Whereas organization-based self-esteem aims to capture “the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member” (Pierce & Gardner, 2004, p.593), we seek to capture one’s self-esteem at work but not only as an organizational member. We thus adapted the items accordingly for focus on one’s believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy “in doing the work” or “at work”. Example items are “I am valuable at work” and “I am efficient and competent in doing my work”. For this scale, the Cronbach’s alpha was .94.

Flexibility

We adapted a 12-item scale from Martin and Rubin (1995) to measure cognitive flexibility, revising the items to be positively worded. Next, we adapted the 5-item strategic flexibility scale from Nadkarni and Herrmann (2010) to measure individual strategic flexibility. Participants reported the extent to which they experienced each described perception in the previous two weeks. For cognitive flexibility for example, an item was, “I am willing to listen and consider alternatives for handling a problem.” For the individual strategic flexibility measure, we used “I frequently adjust strategic plans to better adapt them to changing conditions” for example. The scales’ correlation was .97.

We also examined a second-order factor model to confirm that we could incorporate cognitive and strategic flexibility into a single measure. Following Bandalos (2002), we packaged each dimension into three parcels (i.e., four items in each parcel for cognitive flexibility; two or one item in each parcel for strategic flexibility). The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated a good fit for the second-order factor ($\chi^2(8) = 25.04$; confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .98; Tucker-Lewis index [TLI] = .96; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .09) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The results of both the correlation analysis and CFA support our use of an overall flexibility concept. Calculating the total score of the 17 items, we obtained a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.

Taking charge

We measured taking charge with the three highest-loading items from Morrison and Phelps's (1999) scale (Lebel & Patil, 2018). A sample item was: "This employee often tries to implement solutions to pressing organizational problems." The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89.

Control variables

Employee demographics likely are associated with their proactivity (Moon, Kamdar, Mayer, & Takeuchi, 2008; Ohly, Sonnentag, & Pluntke, 2006; Raub & Liao, 2012), so we controlled for employees' gender, age, education, and organizational tenure. We also control for proactive personality, or proclivity to take action to influence their environments (Bateman & Crant, 1993), because people high in this trait tend to engage in more proactive behaviors at work (Wu & Parker, 2017). We used a four-item measure of proactive personality (Cronbach's alpha = .79) derived from the proactive personality scale (Bateman & Crant, 1993). We controlled for felt obligation, out of consideration of its potential mediation effect. Research indicates a substantial role of social exchange (Huang et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2018; Wong, Wong, Ngo, & Lui, 2005) and social exchange motivations (Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee, 2016) in shaping proactivity. To measure felt obligation, we used a 7-item scale from Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, and Rhoades (2001). The Cronbach's alpha was .82. Finally, we also included vigor to control for its potential mediation effect, from a stress-strain perspective. That is, job insecurity might deplete the energy people have available to perform tasks (e.g., Wang et al., 2015), which impairs their proactivity (Wu et al., 2016). We measured vigor using a three-item vigor scale from Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006), which captures energy at work that can energize proactivity (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .77.

RESULTS

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To confirm the distinctiveness of all variables in this study, we conducted CFAs in AMOS 17.0, starting with a baseline model that included all seven variables in our study. For

this model, we used parcels to represent each construct that had more than ten items; this approach is more reliable when there are too many items, relative to the number of constructs (Bandalos, 2002; Bandalos & Finney, 2001). Specifically, we have three item parcels for job insecurity, work-based self-esteem, and felt obligation, and two item parcels for flexibility. Proactive personality (four items), vigor (three items), and taking charge (three items) were then indicated by their own items. We thus have seven latent factors indicated by 21 indicators (item parcels or items) altogether, which helps reduce the number of parameters in the model. The model yielded an acceptable fit to the data (see Table 1; $\chi^2(149) = 211.10$; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .05). The factor loadings were all significant too, demonstrating convergent validity. To confirm the discriminant validity of the seven constructs, we compared the baseline model with alternative models. The fit indices of Table 1 reveal that the hypothesized seven-factor model fit the data considerably better than any alternatives, in support of the discriminant validity of the seven variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 contains the means, standard deviations, and correlations, revealing that job insecurity correlated negatively with flexibility ($r = -.31, p < .01$). In addition, flexibility correlated positively with taking charge ($r = .22, p < .01$). These results provided preliminary support for our hypotheses. The results in Table 2 also indicated that age related significantly to job tenure ($r = .97, p < .01$). To avoid multicollinearity, we excluded age as a control variable (Smith & Sasaki, 1979).

Insert Table 2 about here

Hypothesis Tests

We examined the hypotheses with multilevel path analysis in Mplus 7.11, to avoid the nested effects that arise because the supervisors rate multiple employees. We used random slopes for hypothesized paths, and fixed effects for controls (Koopman, Lin, Lennard, Matta,

& Johnson, 2019). As indicated in Table 3, job insecurity related negatively to flexibility ($\beta = -4.06, p < .01$, Model 1). Then for the two control mechanisms, we used felt obligation as an outcome variable and included control variables and job insecurity. Here, job insecurity related negatively to felt obligation ($\beta = -2.04, p < .05$, Model 3). With vigor as an outcome, we found that job insecurity related negatively to vigor ($\beta = -3.59, p < .01$, Model 5). Next, when taking charge was the outcome variable and we controlled for felt obligation and vigor, flexibility was positively related to taking charge ($\beta = 2.39, p < .05$, Model 7). After entering job insecurity, the relationship between flexibility and taking charge remained significant ($\beta = 1.99, p < .05$, Model 8), whereas those involving job insecurity ($\beta = .18, n.s.$, Model 8), felt obligation ($\beta = .65, n.s.$, Model 8), and vigor ($\beta = -.96, n.s.$, Model 8) were non-significant.

With the Monte Carlo method, implemented in the RMediation program in R (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011), we also examined the mediating effect of flexibility. MacKinnon, Lockwood, and Williams (2004) and Pituch, Whittaker, and Stapleton (2005) provided evidence that this method is more accurate than other options for constructing confidence limits for an indirect effect. The results indicated a significant mediating effect of flexibility (indirect effect = $-.06$, S.E. = $.03$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = $[-.13, -.01]$), in support of Hypothesis 1.

 Insert Table 3 about here

We now turn to the predicted moderating effect of work-based self-esteem on the relationship between job insecurity and flexibility. As Table 3 indicated, the interaction between job insecurity and work-based self-esteem related negatively to flexibility ($\beta = -2.33, p < .05$, Model 2). We plotted the interaction using Aiken and West's (1991) procedure with one standard deviation above and below the mean of work-based self-esteem to clarify the nature of the moderating effect. Figure 1 thus revealed an interaction pattern, consistent with our hypothesis: Job insecurity related more negatively to flexibility when work-based self-esteem was high ($\beta = -5.38, p < .01$) than when it was low ($\beta = .13, n.s.$), in support of Hypothesis 2.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Finally, with a nested-equation path analytic approach (Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Hayes, 2013), we used the coefficients from Models 2 and 7 to estimate the conditional mediation effects of flexibility on the association between job insecurity and taking charge. In line with Hypothesis 3, the indirect effect of job insecurity on taking charge through flexibility was significant when work-based self-esteem was high (conditional indirect effect = $-.07$, S.E. = $.03$, 95% CI = $[-.13, -.01]$) but not when work-based self-esteem was low (conditional indirect effect = $.01$, S.E. = $.04$, 95% CI = $[-.08, .09]$).

DISCUSSION

Drawing on conservation of resources theory, we investigated the impact of job insecurity on taking charge behaviors, by focusing on the mediating role of flexibility and the moderating role of work-based self-esteem. With a multi-source, multi-wave study design, we confirmed the proposed moderated mediation framework, in which job insecurity constricts employees' flexibility and thereby their taking charge behaviors. The path from job insecurity to taking charge through flexibility was significant even when we controlled for the mediating effects of felt obligation and vigor. In addition, this indirect effect was moderated by work-based self-esteem, such that the negative association between job insecurity and flexibility and thus taking charge behavior was stronger among those high in work-based self-esteem than for those low in work-based self-esteem.

Theoretical Implications

Extant research pertaining to job insecurity mainly focuses on its detrimental effects on employees' attitudes and behaviors, from a social exchange or stress-strain perspective (see Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017). We offer an alternative account based on conservation of resources theory by suggesting that job insecurity can limit one's extra-role behavior to make constructive changes due to its negative impact on one's flexibility. By controlling mediating effects of felt obligation and vigor representing employees' willingness and energy to take initiative respectively (Parker et al., 2010), our finding shows the importance of flexibility in facilitating one's taking charge behavior, a capability mechanism. This novel perspective

enriches the understanding of the resources needed in arousing proactivity, and provides a fundamental explanation of how and why job insecurity can impair employees' proactivity. Our perspective based on conservation of resources theory extends the job preservation perspective of job insecurity (Shoss, 2017). The job preservation perspective suggests that when perceiving job insecurity, employees are likely to engage in behaviors that helps them to keep their current jobs. Our perspective based on conservation of resources theory is consistent with the job preservation perspective that people tend to focus on protecting their resources when perceiving job insecurity. However, different from studies under the job preservation perspective that specifically focusing on strategies to keep their jobs, such as impression management engagement (Huang et al., 2013), our study indicates the side effect when employees focusing on preserving their jobs, that is, being inflexible and not able to bring about constructive changes at work.

Our focus on the mediating role of flexibility also implies a novel insight into employees' proactivity. In line with conservation of resources theory, we show that inflexibility constricts people's attempts to think about and seek solutions, which impairs their taking charge behaviors. We measure both cognitive and behavioral flexibility, and our findings suggest that flexibility in thinking and behaving is required to enable employees to make constructive change. First, behaving proactively involves thinking, such as imagining how things might be different and generating new ideas or alternative ways to perform jobs (Bindl et al., 2012; Frese & Fay, 2001). It would be hard to institute constructive changes to improve the work environment if employees could not think about or perceive alternatives. Second, it also would be difficult to enact proactive behaviors if employees did not pay attention to the context and flexibly adjust their strategy to changes as they arise. To induce changes successfully, employees also must focus on the context and find appropriate approaches to achieve their proactive goals, such as knowing to whom and how to sell their ideas (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). Accordingly, flexibility is critical to the proactive envisioning and implementation of alternative actions.

We also identify work-based self-esteem as an important boundary condition on the effects of job insecurity on employees' flexibility. We found people with high work-based self-esteem are more vulnerable and become less flexible when they confront job insecurity. Our finding is consistent with the finding reported by Blom et al. (2015) that performance-based self-esteem, a more specific self-evaluations than work-based self-esteem, strengthen the negative effect of job insecurity on burnout and depressive symptoms respectively. However, findings in other studies suggest that higher self-evaluations can respond positively to job insecurity. For example, Hui and Lee (2000) examined organization-based self-esteem and found that employees higher in organization-based self-esteem are more likely than those lower in organization-based self-esteem to reduce absenteeism when perceiving job insecurity. Though this finding is seemingly inconsistent with our finding, it may in fact support our theorizing that those higher in work-based self-esteem are likely to focus on how to protect their jobs and thus likely to engage in behaviors that help to achieve the goal, such as reducing absenteeism. In the same study, Hui and Lee (2000) found that those low in organization-based self-esteem tend to increase intrinsic motivation when perceiving job insecurity but those high in organization-based self-esteem do not. They speculated that such finding may reflect that those low in organization-based self-esteem tend to justify their stay in the organization when facing job insecurity by convincing themselves that they have intrinsic motivation toward the jobs. Such speculation is also consistent with our theorizing as it suggests that those higher in organization-based self-esteem do not need to convince themselves to stay in the organization by elevating their intrinsic motivation at work because they are motivated to project their jobs. Of course, this speculation should be further examined.

While these studies have reported moderating effects of self-evaluations, null moderating effects of self-evaluations have also been reported. For example, Hui and Lee (2000) did not find organization-based self-esteem did not moderate the association between job insecurity and organizational commitment. Schreurs et al. (2010) found that job self-efficacy did not moderate the relationship between job insecurity and employee health. Mäkikangas and

Kinnunen, (2003) examine trait self-esteem and did not found a moderating effect of trait self-esteem on the association of job insecurity with job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, mental distress and physical health symptoms. As such, how self-evaluations can play a role in shaping employees' reactions to job insecurity is not conclusive.

There are two potential reasons to explain why we could obtain such mixed findings. Firstly, different self-evaluations concept captures different meanings and thus different effects in responding to job insecurity. For example, trait self-esteem captures the global, general self-evaluations and our work-based self-esteem is self-evaluations based on one's general experiences at work. Performance-based self-esteem and organization-based self-esteem are even more specific self-evaluations at work as the former considers work performance specifically and the latter considers the evaluations of being an organizational member specifically. Secondly, self-evaluations can display different moderation effects of job insecurity when different outcome variables were examined. For example, using the same sample, Hui and Lee (2000, p. 215) found "the moderating effects of organization-based self-esteem differed across outcome variables". Due to the differences in the examined self-evaluations concepts and outcome variables, it is too early to conclude how people differ in their self-evaluations can react to job insecurity. To reconcile the puzzles, future studies should examine different self-evaluations simultaneously while including a wide range of outcomes such as those capturing cognitive, emotional, attitudinal and health-related outcomes of job insecurity. Such examination should help to investigate whether different self-evaluations serve different functions in reacting to job insecurity and whether a specific self-evaluation can spark different moderating effects on different outcome variables.

Practical Implications

Our study emphasizes the potentially high costs of perceived job insecurity; this perception hinders employees' flexibility and taking charge behaviors. Taking charge behaviors are critical for enhancing organizational effectiveness and survival, so organizations should track any sources that evoke perceptions of insecurity and attempt to reduce them. In particular, employees' involvement in decision making and sufficient information sharing by

the organization can effectively reduce job insecurity (Huang, Niu, Lee, & Ashford, 2012). When organizations provide participation opportunities for employees and open communication channels, the employees can appraise their work environment as less threatening and alleviate insecurity perceptions. Managers also should find ways to cultivate supportive settings, such as providing backup, delivering psychological counsel, and ensuring a justice-based environment, to enhance employees' perceptions of security (Loi, Long, & Chan, 2012) and thus maintain their flexibility and proactivity. Some Chinese private organizations lay off their worst performers, without helping them improve their productivity, and Huang et al. (2013) and Lam et al. (2015) propose that these insecure employees may engage more in impression management tactics or OCB to protect their employment status. Combining these insights with our results, we recommend that managers and organizations establish practices that signal to employees that their work is stable and the organization has resources to help them improve, to ensure organizational-level flexibility and proactivity.

Yet it is not possible to eliminate job insecurity completely. Therefore, organizations need to find ways to help employees cope. As illustrated by our study, employees with high work-based self-esteem are more sensitive and susceptible to job insecurity, contrary to an intuition that self-esteem immunizes people to aversive situations and helps them adapt better to external settings. Rather, our results suggest that organizations must pay attention to employees who hold generally positive self-views, sharing their concerns and allocating supportive resources to them when they encounter insecure circumstances. For instance, management could provide positive and timely feedback to these employees, or spend time to have conversations with them, to relieve the insecure perceptions and counter the negative effect from self-concept dissonance. It is also effective if organizations could provide psychological regulation trainings to help relieve the threats to employees' positive self-views.

Because flexibility is instrumental to the development of proactivity, another means to elicit proactivity might be to foster a more flexible mindset among employees. For example, organizations could follow Nadkarni and Herrmann's (2010) suggestions to recruit employees

who exhibit high emotional stability, high extraversion, high openness, and moderate agreeableness. Learning and tacit knowledge also function as antecedents of flexibility (Saini & Johnson, 2005), so organizations should design training programs to increase employees' capability and proficiency. Flexibility entails awareness of various options for dealing with a situation (Bilgin, 2009), so training sessions that develop employees' resilient schema also may be feasible as means to nurture flexibility. Finally, organizations should aim to create stress-free, relaxed work environments to reduce employees' strain and perceptions of insecurity and enhance the chances of their flexibility.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study warrant consideration. First, although the data cannot unequivocally establish causality, our theoretical arguments provide support to the causal inference, and we also took precautions to control for reverse causality (e.g., multi-wave data collection) (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Continued research could test our model using a longitudinal research design or experiments. Second, our study did not capture other environmental threats, such as poor organizational performance, that could influence the ultimate impacts of job insecurity on flexibility and taking charge behaviors. Employees may experience various threats simultaneously, so research could attempt to discern both unique and combined effects of different types of threats. Third, our sample included only employees of a manufacturing company in China, which ensured consistent contextual effects but limited the generalizability of our findings to similar cultural and organizational settings. Replication studies could validate our results in other contexts.

Along with addressing these limitations, continued research could advance the provided insights in several directions. First, in addition to taking charge behaviors, researchers should explore other outcomes of job insecurity. Our results revealed a significant, indirect effect of job insecurity on taking charge behaviors through flexibility, but the direct link between job insecurity and taking charge was relatively weak. It would be helpful to specify alternative outcomes that might be linked to job insecurity, whether directly or indirectly through flexibility, such as task adaptivity. Flexible people tend to move beyond prescribed work roles

and adapt better to their immediate context. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine team-level outcomes, such as team climate, cohesion, or performance.

Second, conservation of resources theory offers a compelling perspective for understanding how job insecurity exerts effects in the workplace, but expanded theoretical frameworks might extend this understanding. It would be interesting to explore other mediating mechanisms through which job insecurity functions, to the detriment of employees' behaviors, beyond constraining their flexibility. Studies should explore alternative theoretical frameworks and their underlying mechanisms, to enhance comprehension of job insecurity and its effects.

Third, we hope researchers address other boundary conditions that might make job insecurity more or less effective. For example, employees who are highly sensitive to unfavorable treatment tend to care more about negative cues (Bunk & Magley, 2011), such that they might be especially vulnerable when they perceive job insecurity (Huang et al., 2017). In addition to personality, contextual factors could be notable boundary conditions; for example, additional resources or support from leaders or coworkers might counteract the aversive effects of job insecurity. Furthermore, work centrality is likely to exacerbate the negative effect of job insecurity as these individuals place great emphasis on their work. These issues constitute interesting topics for research.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on conservation of resources theory, this study examines why and when job insecurity relates to employees' proactivity. The results indicate that job insecurity negatively affects employees' flexibility, which undermines their taking charge behaviors. The direct link between job insecurity and flexibility and the indirect effect of job insecurity on taking charge behaviors through flexibility both are strengthened by employees' work-based self-esteem. Our study thus extends job insecurity literature and reveals several research directions to explore.

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Table 1
Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Key Variables

| Model | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | RMSEA | RMR | CFI | TLI |
|--|----------|-----------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Baseline model (seven-factor model) | 211.10 | 149 | .05 | .01 | .97 | .96 |
| Six-factor model: Job insecurity and work-based self-esteem were combined into one factor | 466.33 | 155 | .10 | .02 | .86 | .82 |
| Five-factor model 1: All Time 1 measures (i.e., job insecurity, proactive personality, and work-based self-esteem) were combined into one factor | 535.16 | 160 | .11 | .02 | .83 | .80 |
| Five-factor model 2: All Time 2 measures (i.e., flexibility, felt obligation, and vigor) were combined into one factor | 367.40 | 160 | .08 | .02 | .91 | .89 |
| Two-factor model: All self-report measures (i.e., job insecurity, proactive personality, work-based self-esteem, flexibility, felt obligation, and vigor) were combined into one factor | 909.49 | 169 | .15 | .03 | .66 | .62 |
| One-factor model: All variables were combined into one factor | 1217.60 | 170 | .18 | .04 | .52 | .46 |

Notes. $N = 188$; TLI is the Tucker-Lewis index; CFI is the comparative fit index; RMR is the root mean residual; and RMSEA is the root mean square error of approximation. Job insecurity, work-based self-esteem, and felt obligation were indicated by three parcels; flexibility was indicated by two parcels, each representing one dimension.

WHY AND WHEN JOB INSECURITY HINDERS TAKING CHARGE

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Variable Correlations

| Variables | Mean | Std. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---------------------------|-------|------|-------|--------|--------|------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|
| 1. Gender | .58 | .49 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Age | 30.47 | 4.71 | .20** | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Education | 1.13 | .34 | .04 | -.31** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Job tenure | 9.34 | 5.09 | .19** | .97** | -.40** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 5. Proactive personality | 3.61 | .51 | .06 | -.12 | .13 | -.11 | 1 | | | | | | |
| 6. Job insecurity | 3.22 | .43 | -.04 | -.15* | .04 | -.11 | -.23** | 1 | | | | | |
| 7. Work-based self-esteem | 3.64 | .60 | .06 | .11 | .00 | .13 | .66** | -.43** | 1 | | | | |
| 8. Felt obligation | 3.25 | .29 | .06 | .10 | -.03 | .12 | .25** | -.24** | .52** | 1 | | | |
| 9. Vigor | 2.88 | .35 | .08 | .14 | -.08 | .16* | .30** | -.33** | .56** | .61** | 1 | | |
| 10. Flexibility | 3.43 | .27 | .00 | .01 | -.08 | .02 | .12 | -.31** | .25** | .35** | .30** | 1 | |
| 11. Taking charge | 3.22 | .62 | .09 | -.06 | .08 | -.05 | .32** | -.14 | .30** | .19** | .23** | .22** | 1 |

Notes. N = 188. Gender: 1 = male; 0 = female. Education: 1 = college degree or below; 2 = bachelor degree or above.

** p < .01, * p < .05

WHY AND WHEN JOB INSECURITY HINDERS TAKING CHARGE

Table 3
Results of the Multilevel Path Analysis

| | Flexibility | | Felt obligation | | Vigor | | Taking charge | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | M ₁ | M ₂ | M ₃ | M ₄ | M ₅ | M ₆ | M ₇ | M ₈ |
| Control variables | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | -.10 | .14 | .24 | .52 | .54 | .91 | 3.19** | 3.12** |
| Education | -1.01 | -1.00 | .03 | -.11 | -.51 | -.80 | 4.57** | 4.57** |
| Job tenure | .43 | -.82 | 1.25 | .12 | 1.97 | .62 | .75 | .78 |
| Proactive personality | .99 | -.48 | 2.57* | -1.67 | 2.93** | -.80 | .69 | .75 |
| Independent variable | | | | | | | | |
| Job insecurity | -4.06** | -2.08* | -2.04* | .14 | -3.59** | -.96 | | .18 |
| Mediator | | | | | | | | |
| Felt obligation | | | | | | | .58 | .65 |
| Vigor | | | | | | | -1.06 | -.96 |
| Flexibility | | | | | | | 2.39* | 1.99* |
| Moderator | | | | | | | | |
| Work-based self-esteem | | 1.84 | | 7.50** | | 5.04** | | |
| Interaction | | | | | | | | |
| Job insecurity work-based self-esteem | | -2.33* | | -.79 | | -.25 | | |

Notes. Level 1 N = 188, Level 2 N = 19. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Gender: 1 = male; 0 = female. Education: 1 = college degree or below; 2 = bachelor degree or above.

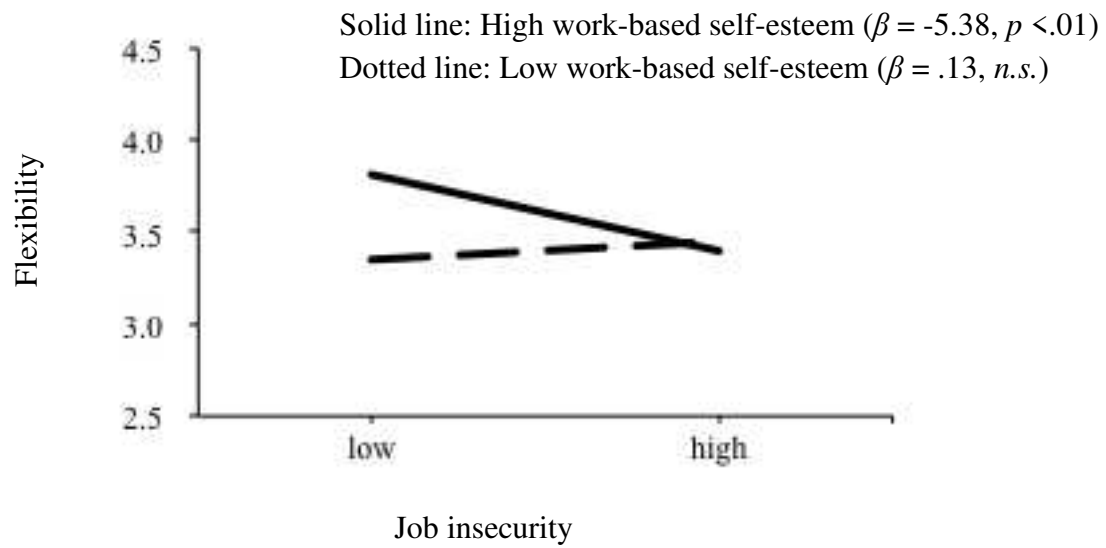


Figure 1. Moderating effect of work-based self-esteem on the relationship between job insecurity and flexibility.