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**Time to leave? The interaction of temporal focus and turnover intentions in explaining voluntary turnover behavior**

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### Abstract

Although turnover intentions are the strongest predictors of voluntary turnover behaviors, many employees who express intentions to leave do not. To explain why some employees translate turnover intentions into behavior and others do not, this study examines the moderating effect of temporal focus (i.e., the degree to which one thinks about the past, present, and future) between turnover intentions and voluntary turnover, using the lens of theory of planned behavior. Data were collected from 683 full-time employees in a range of organizations at three points in time. Results show that past temporal focus conditions the positive relationship between turnover intention and turnover, such that the relationship is stronger when past temporal focus is high. Future temporal focus has an opposite moderating effect, such that the relationship between turnover intention and turnover is weaker when future temporal focus is high. Results show no significant moderating effect of current temporal focus. Overall, temporal focus helps explain why some employees leave and others stay by conditioning the likelihood of translating turnover intentions into quitting. We speculate that a dominant, unspoken paradigm in turnover research is an assumption that individuals are current focused, yet our results suggest scholars should explicitly examine this assumption.

**Keywords:** Temporal focus; turnover intention; voluntary turnover; time; past; present; future

## **Time to leave? The interaction of temporal focus and turnover intentions in explaining voluntary turnover behavior**

Voluntary turnover – “voluntary cessation of membership in an organization by an individual who receives monetary compensation for participation in that organization” (Hom & Griffeth, 1995, p. 5) – remains an important organizational consideration because of associated replacement costs, diminished organizational memory, and damage to employee morale (Hom, Lee, Shaw, & Hausknecht, 2017). The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985), which states that intention is the best predictor of behavior, has been a primary theoretical foundation for turnover models. Beginning with the intermediate linkages model (Mobley, 1977), scholars have often positioned turnover intentions as the key antecedent of voluntary turnover behavior. Despite theoretical differences and a variety of turnover antecedents in turnover models, they mostly concur that an individual’s intention to leave mediates the effects of other antecedents on actual turnover behavior (Hom et al., 2017).

Although turnover intentions are the strongest predictors of turnover behavior (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000), many employees who initially report intending to quit actually decide to stay in their organizations (Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005). Meta-analyses show that turnover intentions explain only 15%-20% of variance in turnover behavior (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth, 1995), and the phenomenon of individuals staying in jobs that they would like to leave is a prime example of career inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). Further, 4% of variance in observed turnover intentions-behavior relationships can be explained by statistical artifacts, with the relations exhibiting wide credibility intervals that include zero (.00-.77; Griffeth et al., 2000; credibility interval of an aggregation of withdrawal cognition constructs .20-.90; Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell, 2018). Because this inconsistency in the effect size is a clear indication

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4 that turnover intentions should not be treated as a proxy of turnover behavior (Vardaman, Allen,  
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6 Renn, & Moffitt, 2008), scholars have called for greater attention to the translation of intentions  
7  
8 to quit into actual turnover (Allen et al., 2005; Hom & Kinicki, 2001).  
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11 Research examining how intentions translate into behavior suggests that intentions  
12  
13 overestimate behavior because intentions are cost-free, whereas behaviors may involve costs or  
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15 sacrifices to implement, and individuals have varying degrees of control (perceived or real) over  
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17 the ability to implement intended behavior (Ajzen, 2002; McEachan, Conner, Taylor, & Lawton,  
18  
19 2011; Ravis & Sheeran, 2003). This theoretical formulation implicitly suggests that the intention-  
20  
21 behavior relationship occurs within time—there is a temporal gap between when intentions are  
22  
23 formed, expressed, or measured and when the behavior is enacted (or not). We propose that  
24  
25 individual characteristics related to time influence this translation. The consideration of costs  
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27 within TPB also implicitly brings in individuals' ability to think outside the present moment as  
28  
29 they make judgments about the present and future value of alternatives. As such, we believe  
30  
31 there are opportunities to make more explicit the temporal elements implicit in TPB-grounded  
32  
33 turnover models such as the Mobley's intermediate linkages model (1977), Hom and Griffeth's  
34  
35 expanded model (1995), and subsequent models that position turnover intentions as the most  
36  
37 proximal predictor of turnover. We build on work investigating the translation of intentions into  
38  
39 behavior and make the consideration of this temporal gap explicit by studying whether  
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41 cognitions about time moderate the relationship between turnover intentions and behavior.  
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48 The temporal cognitions literature suggests that temporal focus – “the allocation of  
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50 attention to the past, present, and future” (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009, p. 2) – is an  
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52 important individual difference that influences how individuals incorporate perceptions about  
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54 past experiences, current situations, and future expectations into their attitudes, behaviors, and  
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## TIME TO LEAVE 4

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4 decisions. Such focus of attention often serves as a moderator of other relationships by either  
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6 increasing or filtering out information, depending upon which time period(s) one typically  
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8 considers (Shipp & Jansen, 2021). For instance, individuals who focus more on the past are more  
9  
10 likely to remember past injustices (Cojuharenco, Patient, & Bashshur, 2011), carrying such  
11  
12 memories with them as they make decisions. To the extent that past injustices have created an  
13  
14 intention to quit, an individual who focuses more on the past might be more likely to turn their  
15  
16 intentions into an actual turnover decision. More broadly, we suggest that temporal focus is a  
17  
18 relevant explanatory construct in turnover processes because turnover decisions can be based on  
19  
20 past experiences, current information, and future speculations (Hom et al., 2017). Yet, since all  
21  
22 people do not consider these three time periods equally (Shipp et al., 2009), one's characteristic  
23  
24 attention to some time periods over others can heighten or weaken the effects of this information.  
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26 That is, temporal focus can explain why turnover intentions are not perfect predictors of behavior  
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28 because thinking about the past, present, and/or future serves as a moderator to either bolster or  
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30 weaken how information from each time period is incorporated into the turnover decision.  
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36 By developing and testing a research model of the moderating effect of past-, present-,  
37  
38 and future temporal focus on the relationship between turnover intentions and behavior, we seek  
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40 to make three contributions. First, we extend theory about individual turnover decision processes  
41  
42 by incorporating individual temporal cognitions. Given that the link between turnover intentions  
43  
44 and turnover behavior inherently has a temporal component, the conceptual rigor and substantive  
45  
46 relevance of temporal focus can capture individuals' subjective thoughts about time that translate  
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48 intentions into behavior. Second, by incorporating temporal focus, we answer calls for research  
49  
50 on time perspectives in turnover behavior (Hom et al., 2017; Mitchell, Burch, & Lee, 2014), and  
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52 temporal focus as a focal construct in theory/research (Bluedorn, 2002; Shipp & Jansen, 2021).  
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4 Third, our model has implications for the TPB beyond turnover. While a stream of research has  
5 explored the conditions under which individuals follow through on their intentions (e.g., Ajzen,  
6 2002; McEachan et al., 2011), temporal cognitions have not been integrated in TPB. Given the  
7  
8 role of time implicit in this theoretical framework, it is important to more overtly consider  
9  
10 individual perceptions of and cognitions about time to extend the theory underlying TPB.  
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### 15 **Conceptual Framework**

16  
17 Theory and research on turnover has prioritized the role of turnover intentions from the  
18 TPB (Hom et al., 2017). The TPB (Ajzen, 1985) holds the most proximal psychological predictor  
19 of a behavior as the intention to perform that behavior. While myriad factors and processes may  
20 drive the development of behavioral intentions, the intention to perform a given behavior  
21 mediates the effects of these more distal antecedents. The TPB also recognizes that some  
22 behaviors are difficult to perform, require new or additional resources, or are subject to  
23 constraints imposed by other individuals or institutions. This perspective has similarities with  
24 theory on career inaction that emphasizes how desired career transitions are less likely when  
25 decisions are difficult and outcomes uncertain (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). This may explain  
26 why meta-analyses of the TPB suggest that intentions and perceived behavioral control (i.e.,  
27 individual's perception of the extent to which performance of the behavior is easy or difficult)  
28 account for only 34% of behavior (Godin & Kok, 1996; Sutton, 1998). Thus, more research is  
29 needed to understand why not everyone behaves in accordance with their intentions.  
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47 The potential constraints influencing the intention-behavior relationship are particularly  
48 germane in considering how turnover intentions are translated into turnover decisions, given that  
49 leaving a job is often a high stakes decision (Allen et al., 2007). In most cases, it is much easier  
50 to contemplate leaving than to actually quit, and research focused on explaining when the  
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## TIME TO LEAVE 6

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4 turnover intentions-turnover behavior relationship is more or less likely to hold has often focused  
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6 on individual or structural differences (Hom et al., 2017). However, despite the growing  
7  
8 importance of individual factors, one characteristic has been overlooked—individuals' subjective  
9  
10 cognitions about time. This is interesting given that issues related to the perception of time are an  
11  
12 important part of the turnover process (Hom, Allen, & Griffeth, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2014). For  
13  
14 example, turnover decisions incorporate recollected elements from the past (e.g., remembering  
15  
16 treatment by a supervisor), perceptions of present experiences (e.g., pay raise), and anticipations  
17  
18 of the future (e.g., projecting one's career prospects).  
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22 To address this oversight, we examine one individual difference related to time labeled  
23  
24 *temporal focus*—the degree to which individuals characteristically think about the past, present,  
25  
26 and/or future periods of their lives (Shipp et al., 2009). This temporal cognition resides within  
27  
28 subjective time, which is the present experience of mentally traveling through, perceiving, and  
29  
30 interpreting time (Shipp & Jansen, 2021). In contrast to objective “clock” time, which is absolute  
31  
32 homogenous, and unidirectional, subjective time is interpretive, heterogeneous, and nonlinear  
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34 (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Temporal focus originates from Lewin's (1942) definition of time  
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36 perspective as the totality of individuals' psychological past, present, and future. Relatively  
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38 stable from early adulthood (McGrath & Tschan, 2004), temporal focus reflects the tendency of  
39  
40 individuals to focus attention on certain time periods to varying degrees (Zimbardo & Boyd,  
41  
42 1999). This individual difference affects how individuals mentally “time travel” by incorporating  
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44 past experiences, current situations, and future expectations into their attitudes, cognitions, and  
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46 behavior (Bluedorn, 2002). For instance, whereas some individuals tend to think more about the  
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48 past (e.g., rumination), others focus on future goals and current actions needed to enact these  
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50 goals (Shipp et al., 2009).  
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4 We propose that temporal focus is relevant to understanding the relationship between  
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6 turnover intentions and behavior because attention to the past, present, and/or future serves as a  
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8 temporal filter that influences attitudes, decisions, and behaviors. In this way, thinking more (or  
9  
10 less) about a particular time period should heighten (or lessen) the salience of information from  
11  
12 that time. For instance, focusing more on the future may cause individuals to pay more attention  
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14 to the costs of leaving, whereas those who think less about the future may underestimate or even  
15  
16 ignore such costs. From the TPB perspective, by elucidating which time period(s) are most  
17  
18 salient, temporal focus can explain why “not all intentions are carried out; some are abandoned  
19  
20 altogether while others are revised to fit changing circumstances” (Ajzen, 1985, p. 11).  
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24 In the next section, we develop theory specific to past, present, and future focus to show  
25  
26 how differences in individual temporal cognitions affect turnover decisions. Consistent with the  
27  
28 literature on temporal focus suggesting that individuals can focus on one, two, or all three time  
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30 periods (Bluedorn, 2002; Shipp, Gabriel, & Lambert, 2021), we develop hypotheses and test  
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32 each dimension on its own, controlling for the others.<sup>1</sup>  
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## 36 Hypotheses

### 37 38 **Past Temporal Focus**

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40 Past temporal focus refers to the attention individuals devote to thinking about previous  
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42 experiences (Shipp et al., 2009). We propose that as individuals move to enact turnover  
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48 <sup>1</sup> We expect a “fan-shaped” effect for each of hypotheses that predict an interaction between temporal focus and  
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50 intentions with more noticeable differences at higher levels of turnover intentions than at lower levels. This is  
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52 because there should be less variance in turnover behavior at very low turnover intentions, and because our  
53  
54 theorizing focuses on temporal focus as the explanatory mechanism for translating at least some degree of intentions  
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56 to leave into turnover as opposed to explaining why individuals who have little to no intention of leaving sometimes  
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58 do anyway.  
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## TIME TO LEAVE 8

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4 intentions, a tendency to focus on the past will systematically strengthen their likelihood of doing  
5  
6 so. This is expected because individuals higher in past focus more frequently replay memories to  
7  
8 relive prior events (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), making the past the context in which they acquire  
9  
10 knowledge about current and future possibilities (Lewin, 1943). As memories are repeatedly  
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12 played in their minds, such recollections seem fresh and relevant (Holman & Silver, 1998; Shipp  
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14 et al., 2009). However, beyond simply thinking more about the past, individuals high on past  
15  
16 temporal focus also attend more to negative past events and interpret situations more negatively  
17  
18 (Holman & Silver, 1998). That is, when past focused individuals recall events, they tend to  
19  
20 perceive these events as more stressful, threatening, and longer lasting than objective  
21  
22 circumstances suggest (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Even in midst of other positive experiences in  
23  
24 the past, because negative experiences are more impactful than positive ones and past focused  
25  
26 individuals tend to keep such negative experiences fresh in their minds (Baumeister, Bratslavsky,  
27  
28 Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), individuals high on past temporal focus are likely to ruminate about  
29  
30 the lasting effects of negative memories (Holman & Silver, 1998). Thus, past temporal focus can  
31  
32 be associated with “overgeneralization bias,” leading individuals to overemphasize similarities  
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34 and underemphasize differences between the past and the present context (Ajzen, 1985).  
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40 In terms of voluntary turnover, we suggest individuals with higher past temporal focus  
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42 who intend to leave will continue to fixate on the events or circumstances that led them to  
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44 develop turnover intentions. For instance, lasting effects of the past are generally reflected in the  
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46 accumulation of dissatisfaction or particularly impactful negative events, both of which trigger  
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48 turnover intentions (Liu, Mitchell, Lee, Holtom, & Hinkin, 2012). Research has also shown that  
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50 individuals consider trajectories of satisfaction over time in turnover decisions (Jansen & Shipp,  
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52 2019), extrapolating expectations from impressions of the past (Liu et al., 2012). Because past  
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4 memories of dissatisfaction and events are fresher and more salient for individuals with high past  
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6 temporal focus (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), and because they also tend to extrapolate experiences  
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8 from the past as likely to continue, they should be more likely to believe that amelioration of  
9  
10 circumstances is unlikely (Aquino, Griffeth, Allen, & Hom, 1997). Thus, for individuals higher  
11  
12 on past temporal focus, quitting can be the only way to resolve the tensions that led to turnover  
13  
14 intentions. This suggests that the relationship between turnover intentions and behavior will be  
15  
16 stronger when individuals focus more on the past. This logic is consistent with a key principle of  
17  
18 TPB that the more one views a given behavior as a “favorable” or preferred solution, the stronger  
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20 should be that individual’s intention to actually perform the behavior (Doll & Ajzen, 1992).  
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23  
24 Given that past focused individuals will want to rectify the past circumstances they perceive as  
25  
26 most salient, this suggests that they will have a more favorable inclination toward actual turnover  
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28 behavior, and the relationship between turnover intention and behavior will be stronger.  
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31 ***Hypothesis 1:** Past temporal focus moderates the positive relationship between turnover*  
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33 *intention and voluntary turnover such that the relationship between turnover intention and*  
34  
35 *turnover will be stronger when past temporal focus is higher.*  
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### 38 **Current Temporal Focus**

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40 Current temporal focus refers to the attention individuals devote to thinking about the  
41  
42 present (Shipp et al., 2009). We propose that as individuals consider whether to enact turnover  
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44 intentions, a tendency to focus on the present will systematically strengthen their likelihood of  
45  
46 doing so, albeit for different reasons than for past temporal focus. Turnover intentions arise in  
47  
48 part because of how individuals assess current job, organization, and nonwork circumstances  
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50 (Hom et al., 2017). Having a strong “here and now” orientation leads individuals high on current  
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52 temporal focus to rely more on present-day experiences and immediate surroundings, perceiving  
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## TIME TO LEAVE 10

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4 such information as more salient for attitudes and behaviors. Although present experiences can  
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6 be positive or negative, research shows that individuals high on current temporal focus report  
7  
8 more positive interpretations of their experiences, resulting in higher levels of well-being and life  
9  
10 satisfaction than those low on current temporal focus (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). This can occur  
11  
12 because current temporal focus is positively related to internal locus of control and optimism,  
13  
14 leading to perceptions that circumstances are more positive or at least under their control to  
15  
16 change (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Thus, current focused individuals tend to enjoy living in the  
17  
18 moment, which can lead to more impulsivity and risk-taking (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).  
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22 We reason that current temporal focus likely influences the turnover intention-behavior  
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24 relationship partly because it is intertwined with perceptions of control (e.g., ability to secure an  
25  
26 alternative) and risk (e.g., willingness to quit even without an alternative), key factors within the  
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28 TPB (Ajzen, 1985). Given that research has shown that individuals with an internal locus of  
29  
30 control are more likely to translate turnover intentions into behavior (Allen et al., 2005), those  
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32 who focus more on the present may be more likely to believe they can control the process of  
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34 translating their intentions to secure a new job into reality. It is also possible from previous  
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36 findings on temporal focus that individuals with higher current temporal focus are more likely to  
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38 act on their turnover intentions because they are more risk-seeking (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999),  
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40 which in turn lead them downplay the risks associated with actual turnover. Such individuals can  
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42 quit spontaneously due to their “here and now” orientation that leads an alternative job to sound  
43  
44 more appealing. Research has also shown that individuals who tolerate risk are more likely to  
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46 translate their (present) intentions into turnover behavior in part because finding a new job is a  
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48 risky proposition (Allen et al., 2005; Vardaman et al., 2008). Thus, from the TPB perspective  
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50 (Ajzen, 1985), the turnover intention-behavior relation can be stronger among current focused  
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4 individuals because they tend to perceive a relative ease and lack of risk if they act upon their  
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6 intentions. Because of their tendency to discount the risks of leaving and belief in their ability to  
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8 control circumstances, we expect that individuals high on current temporal focus are more likely  
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10 to translate turnover intentions into turnover behavior.

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12 ***Hypothesis 2:*** *Current temporal focus moderates the positive relationship between turnover*  
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14 *intention and voluntary turnover such that the relationship between turnover intention and*  
15  
16 *turnover will be stronger when current temporal focus is higher.*

### 17 18 19 20 **Future Temporal Focus**

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22 Future temporal focus refers to the attention individuals devote to thinking about  
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24 experiences to come, such as imagining, envisioning, and planning for future events (Shipp et al.,  
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26 2009). As our last hypothesis, we propose that as individuals consider whether to enact their  
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28 turnover intentions, a tendency to focus on the future will systematically weaken their likelihood  
29  
30 of doing so. In comparison to individuals who focus less on the future, individuals with a strong  
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32 future temporal focus are more likely to plan for their future careers and be aware that imagined  
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34 futures may not materialize (Zacher, 2014). They are also less likely to exhibit risky behaviors  
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36 than those with low future temporal focus (Kooij, Kanfer, Betts, & Rudolph, 2018) perhaps  
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38 because future focused individuals are more conscientious (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999).  
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42  
43 These considerations lead us to propose that individuals with higher future temporal  
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45 focus are *less* likely to enact turnover intentions for two reasons. First, turnover behavior often  
46  
47 involves more uncertainty and risk than simply intending to quit (Allen et al., 2007). To the  
48  
49 extent individuals higher on future temporal focus are less likely to take risks (Kooij et al.,  
50  
51 2018), they pay more attention to costs associated with leaving, weighing the costs more  
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53 carefully compared to individuals who think less about the future. Although the current job  
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4 might have led them to consider quitting, taking a new position elsewhere introduces additional  
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6 unknowns, some of which can be worse than existing circumstances. As such, future focused  
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8 individuals are less likely to translate riskless intentions into behavior. Second, a concomitant  
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10 focus on long-term career goals (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) might lead individuals high on future  
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12 temporal focus to consider the future ramifications of leaving a job more carefully once a  
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14 concrete alternative arises. Even though they could be just as likely to develop turnover  
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16 intentions in the face of shocks, future focused individuals should have more confidence they can  
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18 achieve long-term goals (Kooij et al., 2018). That is, they may excuse problems at the current job  
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20 as temporary and instead pursue long-term interests by staying. This is in line with research that  
21  
22 shows how anticipated regret can attenuate the intention-behavior relationship (Sheeran &  
23  
24 Orbell, 1999). From the TPB perspective (Ajzen, 1991), the intention-behavior relationship  
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26 should be weaker among future focused individuals because they will see more difficulty to act  
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28 upon intentions, leading them to more carefully consider thoughts of quitting before translating  
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30 into behaviors.  
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36 In sum, we predict that the future focused individual is more likely to consider future  
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38 risks relative to predicted benefits, future career considerations, and the likelihood of improved  
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40 circumstances. Even in the face of possible gains accompanied with quitting, these longer-term  
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42 considerations could potentially discourage the turnover decision as too risky, leading us to  
43  
44 expect a weaker relationship between turnover intentions and behavior.  
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47 ***Hypothesis 3:** Future temporal focus moderates the positive relationship between turnover*  
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49 *intention and voluntary turnover such that the relationship between turnover intention and*  
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51 *behavior will be weaker when future temporal focus is higher.*  
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## 54 **Method**

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## Sample and Procedures

We collected data through a research company with a diverse sample of full-time employees from a range of privately-owned organizations in Japan. Participation was voluntary (respondents received small incentives in the form of online shopping points). We collected data with online surveys at three time points in time (six months between each survey). The research company sent surveys to employees fulfilling our screening criteria and assured participants of confidentiality, emphasizing that the data were collected for research purposes.

At Time 1, we measured demographics and individual differences, including temporal focus (1,430 respondents: 67% response rate). At Time 2, we measured turnover intentions (954 respondents: 43% response rate). At Time 3, we measured voluntary turnover (737 respondents: 34% response rate). We then deleted respondents who did not reply to all three surveys or those 12 respondents who were terminated (i.e., involuntary rather than voluntary turnover), resulting in a final sample ( $N = 683$ ). We also compared respondents who participated in all three surveys with those who dropped out early in terms of age, gender, conscientiousness, locus of control, proactive personality, temporal focus, and turnover intentions; however, we did not find any significant differences. We linked these three surveys to each other by the respondents' identification numbers provided by the research company.

In the final sample, the average age of respondents was 38.57 years; 67% were male and 66% were married. They worked in organizations from diverse industries, such as construction (6.27%); finance and insurance (6.56%); healthcare (12.18%); manufacturing (12.98%); retail (5.41%); services (24.66%); transportation and communication (6.27%); and others (25.67%). The respondents represent various occupations including administrative and managerial (7.64%); professional and engineering (30.21%); and sales (12.40%).

## Measures

All survey items were translated from English to Japanese using the method of back-translation (Brislin, 1980). Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured by seven-point (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) Likert-type scales.

**Temporal focus.** This was measured by the Temporal Focus Scale from Shipp et al. (2009). The scale consists of 12 items that represent three, four-item subscales: past temporal focus (e.g., “I replay memories of the past in my mind”); current temporal focus (e.g., “I focus on what is currently happening in my life”); and future temporal focus (e.g., “I think about what my future has in store”). Respondents rated items on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Constantly). Cronbach’s alphas for past, current, and future temporal focus respectively were .96, .76, and .88.

**Turnover intentions.** This was measured by a three-item scale from Mitchell et al., (2001). A sample item is “I intend to leave the company in the next 12 months.” Cronbach’s alpha was .97.

**Voluntary turnover.** In line with prior research (e.g., Allen, Peltokorpi, & Rubenstein, 2016), participants were asked to report if they were still employed in the same organization. More specifically, participants were asked to answer to four statements: (1) I am still employed in the same organization, (2) I left the organization because I was formally asked to leave, (3) I left the organization to work for another organization, (4) I left the organization for other reasons (please explain). We then checked the reasons provided for statement 4 and categorized them as involuntary or voluntary turnover and retained only those who voluntarily quit. For instance, we categorized the following reason as voluntary turnover: “I quit because I got married.” We used the information from these four statements to code “0” for stayers and “1” for leavers.



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4       **Control variables.** To reduce concerns about alternative explanations for our findings, we  
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6 controlled for seven variables that relate to temporal focus or voluntary turnover. We controlled  
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8 for employee age because temporal focus can change due to aging processes (Park et al., 2017)  
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10 and because older people are less likely to voluntarily leave organizations (Rubenstein et al.,  
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12 2018). We controlled for employee gender and marital status because males and married people  
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14 less frequently leave jobs (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). We controlled for education level because  
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16 more educated people resign more frequently (Griffeth et al., 2000).  
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20       We also measured three personality variables that are related to temporal focus or  
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22 turnover. We controlled for employee conscientiousness due to its negative relation with past  
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24 temporal focus and positive relation with present and future temporal focus (Shipp et al., 2009).  
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26 Conscientiousness is also negatively related with turnover intentions (Orvis, Dudley, & Cortina,  
27  
28 2008) and turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Conscientiousness was measured by a 10-item  
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30 scale from Goldberg (1999). A sample item is “I pay attention to details.” Cronbach’s alpha  
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32 was .74. We controlled for employee work locus of control because internals are less likely to  
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34 voluntarily leave their organizations (Rubenstein et al., 2018). By holding locus of control  
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36 constant, we are also able to move beyond the impact of control perceptions in TPB (Ajzen,  
37  
38 1991) to isolate the effects of temporal cognitions. Work locus of control was measured by a 16-  
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40 item scale from Spector (1988). A sample item is “Getting the job you want is mostly a matter of  
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42 luck.” Cronbach’s alpha was .82. Finally, we controlled for proactive personality due to its  
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44 positive relation with future temporal focus (Strobel, Tumasjan, Spörrle, & Welpe, 2013) and  
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46 research linking proactivity to following through on intentions (Allen et al., 2005). Proactive  
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48 personality was measured by a 10-item scale from Seibert, Crant, and Kraimer (1999). A sample  
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50 item is “I excel at identifying opportunities.” Cronbach’s alpha was .90.  
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## Results

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS Version 23 to examine whether our measurement model had an acceptable fit. The seven-factor model provided an acceptable fit with the data ( $\chi^2 = 3041.39_{(1146)}$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Comparative Fit Index = .91; Tucker Lewis Index = .90; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = .05; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and reliability estimates of all multi-item scales. In this study, 17% of participants voluntarily quit between Time 1 and Time 3 and the correlation between turnover intentions and voluntary turnover was positive ( $r = .33$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Consistent with prior research (Cojuharenco et al., 2011; Leroy, Shipp, Blount, & Licht, 2015; Shipp et al., 2009), present and future temporal focus were positively correlated ( $r = .57$ ,  $p < .01$ ). While moderately high, this correlation is similar to that found by Leroy et al. (.58).

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here  
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We used logistic regression with SPSS Version 23 to test our hypotheses. Independent variables were mean centered before computing product terms. As shown in Table 2, we entered control variables and turnover intention in Step 1, temporal focus in Step 2, and interaction terms in Step 3 to test Hypotheses 1-3. The pseudo  $R^2$  measure assessing goodness of fit for each of the models improved from 18% in Step 1 to 21% in Step 3.

Hypothesis 1 stated that past temporal focus moderates the positive relationship between turnover intention and voluntary turnover such that the relationship would be stronger when past temporal focus is high. As shown in Table 2 (Step 3), this interaction term was significant ( $B = .28$ , Wald Statistics = 5.02,  $p = .02$ ), with the likelihood of turnover 32% higher [ $\text{Exp}(B) =$

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4 1.32] when individuals were one unit higher in past temporal focus, even after controlling for  
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6 current and future temporal focus. We conducted simple slope tests and plotted this significant  
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8 interaction (Aiken & West, 1991). As shown in Figure 1, when past temporal focus is higher,  
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10 turnover intention is more positively related to voluntary turnover ( $B = 1.03$ , Wald Statistics =  
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12 35.73,  $p < .01$ ) than when past temporal focus is lower ( $B = .64$ , Wald Statistics = 14.97,  $p$   
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14  $< .01$ ). We also probed the boundaries of the moderation effect with the Johnson–Neyman  
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16 technique. Results of 95% region of significance showed that the conditional effects of past  
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18 temporal focus were significant for any value greater than .77. These findings provide support  
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20 for Hypothesis 1 in the sense that the slope of the relationship between turnover intentions and  
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22 turnover is more positive when past temporal focus is higher as predicted. It is worth noting that  
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24 the shape of Figure 1 is more of a cross-over effect than anticipated, with differences in turnover  
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26 more pronounced at low levels of turnover intentions (that is, past temporal focus appears to  
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28 accelerate the impact of turnover intentions as they increase, but from a very low likelihood of  
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30 turnover among those with high past temporal focus and low turnover intentions in our data).  
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36 Hypothesis 2 stated that current temporal focus moderates the positive relationship  
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38 between turnover intention and voluntary turnover such that the relationship would be stronger  
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40 when current temporal focus is high. As shown in Table 2 (Step 3), the interaction is not  
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42 significant ( $B = .06$ , Wald Statistics = .17,  $p = .73$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.  
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45 Hypothesis 3 stated that future temporal focus moderates the positive relationship  
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47 between turnover intention and voluntary turnover such that the relationship would be weaker  
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49 when future temporal focus is high. As shown in Table 2 (Step 3), the interaction term was  
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51 significant and negative ( $B = -.31$ , Wald Statistics = 4.59,  $p = .03$ ). When individuals were one  
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53 unit higher in future temporal focus, the likelihood of turnover is 26% lower [ $\text{Exp}(B) = .74$ ]. We  
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4 conducted simple slope tests and plotted these interactive effects. As shown in Figure 2, when  
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6 future temporal focus was lower, turnover intention was more positively related to voluntary  
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8 turnover ( $B = 1.06$ , Wald Statistics = 35.58,  $p < .01$ ) than higher future temporal focus ( $B = .66$ ,  
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10 Wald Statistics = 17.48,  $p < .01$ ). We also probed the boundaries of the moderation effect with  
11  
12 the Johnson–Neyman technique. Results of 95% region of significance showed that the effects of  
13  
14 future temporal focus were significant for any value less than 6.20. These findings support  
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16 Hypothesis 3, and the shape of Figure 2 is consistent with our expectations that differences in  
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18 turnover would be more pronounced at higher rather than lower levels of turnover intentions.  
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24 Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here  
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29 To rule out the control variables as a potential explanation for the results (Becker,  
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31 2005), we tested Hypotheses 1-3 with identical analyses as above without control variables. The  
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33 results were similar (Hypothesis 1,  $B = .29$ , Wald Statistics = 5.61,  $p = .02$ ; Hypothesis 2,  $B$   
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35 = .06, Wald Statistics = .18,  $p = .67$ ; Hypothesis 3,  $B = -.33$ , Wald Statistics = 5.46,  $p = .02$ ).  
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### 38 Discussion

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40 This study examined whether individuals' temporal cognitions in the form of past-,  
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42 current-, and future temporal focus condition the relationship between turnover intentions and  
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44 turnover behaviors. This question is relevant for explaining how turnover intentions translate into  
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46 voluntary turnover behaviors; however, the topic has been overlooked in turnover theory and  
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48 research. Our findings show that although current temporal focus has no significant effect, past  
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50 and future temporal focus had significant moderating effects on the relationship. Whereas a  
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52 stronger past temporal focus strengthened the relationship, a stronger future temporal focus  
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4 weakened it. The findings contribute to theory and research on turnover by showing that the  
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6 turnover intention-behavior linkage is influenced by individuals' characteristic levels of thought  
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8 about past and future experiences, which suggests new ways of thinking about turnover theory.  
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### 10 **Theoretical Contributions**

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12 The moderating effects found in this study delineate possible boundary conditions of  
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14 turnover theory. By focusing on the direct turnover intention-turnover behavior relationship  
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16 (Hom et al., 2017), prior turnover research may have implicitly assumed that individuals rely on  
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18 their *present* circumstances to inform their turnover decisions. That is, these models may  
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20 implicitly refer to current thoughts of quitting and assume that such thoughts affect all  
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22 individuals equally. In contrast, our findings show that individuals who focused more on the  
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24 present (i.e., current temporal focus) did not differ in enacting their turnover intentions. Instead,  
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26 the turnover intention-behavior relationship was stronger for those with a higher *past* temporal  
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28 focus and/or a lower *future* temporal focus, with the likelihood of turnover 32% higher when  
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30 individuals were one unit higher in past temporal focus and 26% lower for those one unit higher  
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32 in temporal focus. We integrated the TPB and temporal focus research to reason that, because  
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34 individuals high on past temporal focus tend to ruminate on past events and are less likely to see  
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36 reasons for change (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), they may hold on to the reasons leading to  
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38 turnover intentions, even if circumstances could change. Future temporal focus had an opposite  
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40 moderating relationship perhaps because individuals high on future temporal focus tend to think  
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42 through any momentary reactions (Shipp et al., 2009) instead accounting for the potential future  
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44 uncertainties of quitting. Our findings suggest that content and process models of turnover,  
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46 especially those that position turnover cognitions as a mediator (e.g., Mobley, 1977), may benefit  
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48 by considering the role of temporal cognitions as a moderating factor that determines how likely  
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## TIME TO LEAVE 20

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4 these intentions will translate into action. Overall, our findings suggest room for turnover  
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6 scholars to consider how individuals think about time beyond present experiences to incorporate  
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8 the specific effects of thinking about the past and the future.  
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11 This emphasis on temporal focus also provides conceptual extensions and avenues for  
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13 future research on other approaches to turnover theory, such as the unfolding model (Lee &  
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15 Mitchell, 1994), job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001), and career (in)action (Verbruggen &  
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17 DeVos, 2020). Consider, for example, one's tendency to "mentally time travel" to the past or  
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19 future. The unfolding model (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) provides four turnover decision paths that  
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21 unfold over time with varying speeds. From the temporal cognition perspective, we speculate  
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23 that more past focused individuals follow Path 1 (i.e., a shock activates a preexisting or past plan  
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25 for leaving) or Path 2 (i.e., a shock prompts the person to reconsider his or her prior attachment  
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27 due to the occurred image violations), both of which lead to a quicker exit (Mitchell & Lee,  
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29 2001). In contrast, a future focused individual is more likely to follow Path 3 (i.e., a shock  
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31 produces image violation that initiates the person's evaluations of the current job and various  
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33 future alternatives) or Path 4 (i.e., where building job dissatisfaction induces leaving when the  
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35 trajectory of experiences is anticipated to continue). The latter paths can be slower, particularly  
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37 Path 4, which is consistent with the careful planning of future focused individuals. It can also be  
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39 speculated that shocks lead to spontaneous turnover behavior among present focused individuals.  
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46 Turning to job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), a key prediction is that job-  
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48 related links (i.e., formal and/or informal work ties), fit (i.e., compatibility with work), and  
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50 sacrifices (i.e., material, psychological, or social costs of leaving) associated with severing the  
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52 employment relationship make turnover behavior less likely. Our perspective suggests that past  
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54 focused individuals could place less weight on such considerations, making job embeddedness  
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4 more effective at retaining only for future focused individuals. The theory of career inaction  
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6 (Verbruggen & DeVos, 2020), in turn, suggests individuals considering significant career actions  
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8 such as changing jobs engage in mental time travel, counter-factual thinking about what might  
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10 have been, and rumination about the past. Our theorizing and empirical results suggest  
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12 considering the role of individual differences in temporal cognitions in these processes, which  
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14 are applicable to changing jobs but could apply to other forms of career decisions.  
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18 The emphasis on temporal focus can also have implications for the growing body of  
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20 work investigating the spread of voluntary turnover through social networks. For instance, in  
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22 comparison to individuals who tend to focus more on past or future, individuals high on present  
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24 temporal focus have been found to pay more attention to interpersonal interactions at workplace  
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26 (Cojuharenco et al., 2011), suggesting that socio-temporal cues might be more salient to this  
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28 group (Leroy et al., 2015) and could explain the relationship between their turnover intentions  
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30 and behavior. For instance, daily workplace discussions about job opportunities, co-worker job  
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32 searches, or others' pre-quitting behaviors (Gardner, van Iddekinge, & Hom, 2018), may  
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34 encourage more attention to one's turnover intentions as the contagion of others' turnover  
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36 intentions becomes more salient.  
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41 Lastly, the results also contribute to the TPB (Ajzen, 1985) by suggesting that the  
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43 intention-behavior linkage is influenced by the attention individuals place on the past and future.  
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45 Whereas the TPB-based rationale suggests that individuals who develop stronger intentions  
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47 expend more efforts to follow through on those intentions (Van Breukelen, Van der Vlist, &  
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49 Steensma, 2004), our findings show that individuals are more or less inclined to act on intentions  
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51 based on their level of attention to the past or future. The temporal focus dimensions we  
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53 examined can partly explain why intentions are not consistent predictors of behavior (e.g., Ajzen,  
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2002; McEachan et al., 2011). When individuals are more inclined to think about the past, any prior experience that led to intentions are likely to remain top of mind and thus move an individual to the intended behavior. Such an addition to the TPB literature goes beyond the implicit focus on the future (i.e., intentions being situated in the future) to suggest that past experiences also impact current decisions to act on one's intentions. Furthermore, our findings are consistent with the idea that considering temporal cognitions in terms of the temporal focus construct influences how much individuals perceive they have volitional control of their intentions. Thus, temporal focus may be a useful moderator in other literatures that examine intention-behavior relationships.

### **Practical Implications**

Our findings can provide practical suggestions for managing turnover. For instance, because past temporal focus strengthens the positive relationship between turnover intentions and voluntary turnover, temporal focus could be measured by the Temporal Focus Scale (Shipp et al., 2009) when surveying employees. Doing so could enable managers to pay special attention to highly past focused individuals. Such a focus on the past would be observed when such employees frequently ruminate about past injustices without being able to move on. When such individuals are unable to let go of past negative experiences, our results suggest that they will be at greater risk of turnover. Thus, managers are recommended to continue to check in with past focused individuals to address any building resentments that other employees might not harbor.

Our findings also suggest that employee surveys of turnover intentions may capture the likelihood of turnover differently for different respondents. Because some individuals who report intending to quit are more likely to ultimately stay, such as those higher in future temporal focus, asking individuals about their quit intentions is obviously an incomplete story. In combination



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4 with assessments of turnover intentions, employee surveys that include a measure of temporal  
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6 focus may help to more accurately estimate actual turnover behavior, and could potentially be  
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8 useful data points as firms attempt to develop predictive turnover flight risk models.  
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### 10 **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

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13 The main limitations in this study involve the ability of our research design to rule out  
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15 alternative explanations. Even though we incorporated seven control variables to eliminate  
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17 alternative explanations, other constructs may explain our respondents' behaviors, such as job  
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19 search and various employability-related factors. Our data also consisted of self-reports. For  
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21 several reasons, we believe our measures provide useful data, such as assessing psychological  
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23 constructs (Mohammed & Marhefka, 2020) best described by the person who experiences them  
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25 (Shipp et al., 2009); data collected at three points in time to minimize the effects of potential  
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27 transitory biases at the time of the survey (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003); and  
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29 our focus on interaction effects that cannot be artifacts of common method variance (Siemsen,  
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31 Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). Nevertheless, future research may collect data from multiple sources  
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33 and use designs with stronger internal validity to confirm and extend our findings. Finally, the  
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35 findings may have limited generalizability in other countries because this study was conducted in  
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37 Japan. However, research also suggests that temporal focus profiles in Japan are similar to the  
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39 United Kingdom (Chishima, McKay, & Cole, 2017), and the Temporal Focus Scale mean scores  
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41 for past-, current-, and future temporal focus in our sample are similar to studies conducted in the  
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43 USA (Cojuharenco et al., 2011) and Ireland (McKay, Percy, Goudie, Sumnall, & Cole, 2012).  
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45 Future research could test the hypothesized relationships in other countries to determine if  
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47 similarities or differences are meaningful.  
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**Table 1.** Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	38.56	10.87											
2. Gender	.66	.47	.27 **										
3. Marital status	.44	.49	.47 **	.21 **									
4. Education level	3.69	.88	-.15 **	.10 *	.00								
5. Conscientiousness	4.34	.71	.10 **	.05	.11 **	.05	<b>.74</b>						
6. Work locus of control	4.22	.66	.01	-.05	.02	.01	.14 **	<b>.82</b>					
7. Proactive personality	4.21	.89	.03	.02	.05	.05	.37 **	.39 **	<b>.90</b>				
8. Turnover intention	2.83	1.79	-.06	-.06	-.07	.00	-.06	.01	-.03	<b>.97</b>			
9. Past temporal focus	3.66	1.23	-.20 **	-.07	-.17 **	.01	.02	.25 **	.21 **	.06	<b>.96</b>		
10. Current temporal focus	3.80	1.14	-.08 *	.02	-.04	.03	.23 **	.26 **	.46 **	-.03	.32 **	<b>.76</b>	
11. Future temporal focus	3.68	1.23	-.12 **	.03	-.04	.03	.19 **	.31 **	.47 **	.01	.44 **	.57 **	<b>.88</b>
12. Voluntary turnover	.17	.38	.02	-.07	-.04	-.07	.02	-.06	-.01	.33 **	.02	-.05	-.04

Note. N = 683, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, Cronbach's alphas are indicated in bold on the diagonal. Gender: Female = 0, male = 1; Marital status, unmarried = 0, married = 1, Education level: middle school = 1, high school = 2, vocational school/2-year university degree = 3, undergraduate degree (Bachelors) = 4, graduate degree (Masters, Doctorate) = 5, voluntary turnover: no = 0, yes = 1.

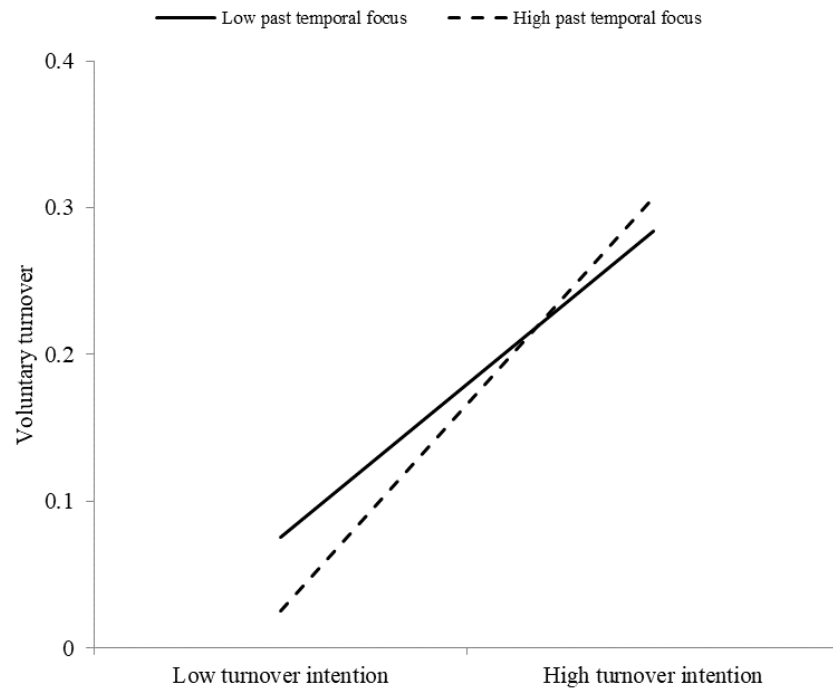
**Table 2.** Logistic regression analyses predicting voluntary turnover

Variables	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	B	SE	Wald	p	Exp (B)	B	SE	Wald	p	Exp (B)	B	SE	Wald	p	Exp (B)
Age	.02	.01	2.35	.12	1.02	.02	.01	1.61	.20	1.02	.01	.01	1.22	.27	1.01
Gender (1 = male)	-.37	.24	2.45	.12	.69	-.35	.24	2.16	.14	.70	-.35	.25	2.08	.15	.70
Marital status (1 = married)	-.22	.24	.81	.37	.80	-.20	.25	.67	.41	.82	-.18	.25	.54	.46	.83
Education level	-.19	.12	2.27	.06	.83	-.19	.12	2.36	.12	.83	-.19	.12	2.25	.13	.83
Conscientiousness	.17	.17	1.12	.29	1.19	.19	.17	1.33	.25	1.21	.19	.17	1.25	.26	1.21
Work locus of control	-.34	.18	3.78	.05	.71	-.31	.18	2.99	.08	.73	-.30	.19	2.64	.10	.74
Proactive personality	.05	.14	.10	.75	1.05	.14	.16	.72	.39	1.15	.13	.16	.62	.43	1.14
Turnover intention	.85	.11	63.77	.00	2.35	.85	.11	63.19	.00	2.35	.86	.11	60.70	.00	2.38
Past temporal focus						.06	.13	.16	.69	1.05	-.05	.15	.10	.72	.95
Current temporal focus						-.12	.14	.64	.42	.89	-.15	.15	.91	.34	.86
Future temporal focus						-.11	.15	.50	.48	.89	-.02	.16	.02	.89	.98
Turnover intention x past temporal focus											.28	.12	5.02	.02	1.32
Turnover intention x current temporal focus											.06	.13	.16	.67	1.06
Turnover intention x future temporal focus											-.31	.14	4.59	.03	.74
Model $\chi^2_{(df)}$			82.05 <sub>(8)</sub>	.00				83.83 <sub>(11)</sub>	.00				91.52 <sub>(14)</sub>	.00	
-2 log likelihood			549.77					547.99					540.29		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			.18					.19					.21		

Note.  $N = 683$ .

## TIME TO LEAVE 30

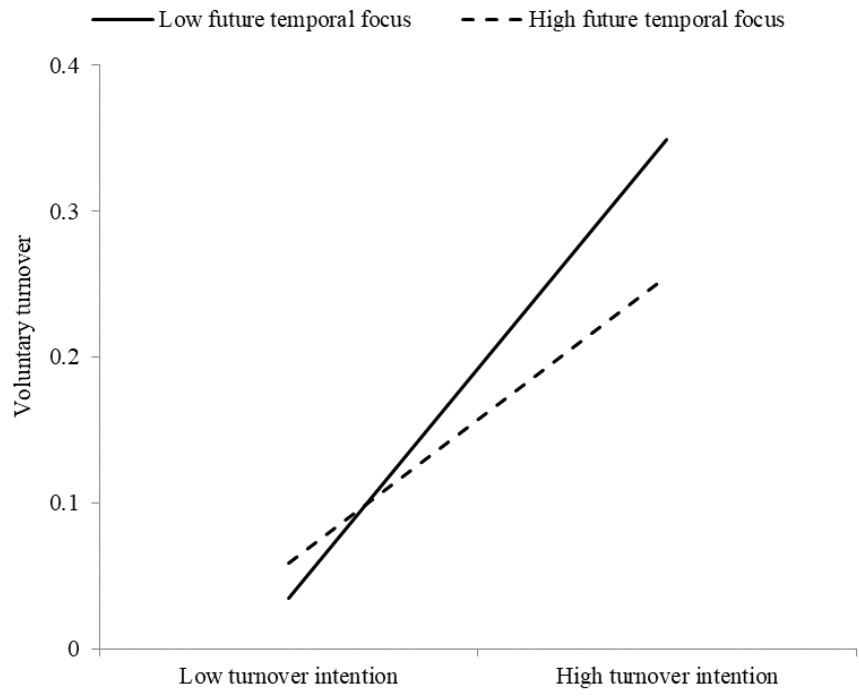
**Figure 1.** Interaction between turnover intentions and past temporal focus predicting voluntary turnover



Review



**Figure 2.** Interaction between turnover intentions and future temporal focus predicting voluntary turnover



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