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**Transmitting Affective Job Insecurity (AJI) within Teams:**

**Layoff Effects of AJI Convergence on Intrateam Power Struggles and Team Outcomes**

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**Abstract**

Extant research on job insecurity (JI) largely focuses on the individual level, rather than considering the process of JI at collective, team levels. But employees’ worries and anxiety about potential job losses create affective job insecurity (AJI), which can converge over time in teams, especially following dramatic changes such as layoffs. Drawing on a multilevel theory of emergence in teams and uncertainty reduction theory, this study offers theoretical predictions of AJI convergence, as well as its potential influences on team functioning and outcomes. A four-wave, post-layoff survey of 468 employees and 91 supervisors confirms two major predictions. First, AJI convergence exists within teams over time, as established by a consensus emergence model. Second, teams with members who converge at a high level of AJI experience intrateam power struggles that impair both team performance and team proactivity. By theorizing about the phenomenon of AJI convergence, this study not only expands the notion of JI from the individual to the team level, noting its harmful effects on teams, but also highlights the need for both team members and team leaders to pay close attention to such convergence and its potentially detrimental effects following layoffs.

***Keywords***: layoffs, affective job insecurity convergence, multilevel theory of emergence, uncertainty reduction theory, intrateam power struggles, team outcomes, consensus emergence model

The rapid changes, substantial turbulence, and great uncertainty that characterize today’s business environments (Andersen, 2022) imply that to keep pace with technological advances, shifting markets, economic fluctuations, and intensified competition, organizations must constantly change and adapt (Nicita, 2019; Rafferty, 2022). These changes include strategic downsizing efforts to cut costs and increase organizational efficiency (Sucher & Gupta, 2018). Even if layoffs are essential to an organization’s competitiveness and survival, they leave employees vulnerable to job losses (Etehadi & Karatepe, 2019; Lee, Huang, & Ashford, 2018), which tends to evoke their job insecurity (JI), defined as a perception of threats to the continuity and stability of currently experienced employment (Shoss, 2017). Prior literature shows consistently that, as a response to organizational changes, JI has detrimental effects on employees’ satisfaction, job involvement, performance, organizational commitment, trust, turnover intentions, and well-being (for a meta-analysis, see Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; for reviews, see Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017).

Noting the significance of JI in organizational change contexts, scholars have called for more research into how it develops. Extant empirical evidence (Bernhard-Oettel, Rigotti, Clinton, & De Jong, 2013; Debus, König, & Kleinmann, 2014; Keim, Landis, Pierce, & Earnest, 2014; Loi, Lam, & Chan, 2012; Yam, Tang, Jackson, Su, & Gray, in press) and reviews (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017) reveal that specific organizational contexts (e.g., those lacking procedural justice, those that violate psychological contracts with employees), employment contract types (e.g., temporary), new technology (e.g., human–robot collaborations), and individual differences (e.g., negative affectivity, locus of control, low self-esteem) all contribute to JI perceptions. Such studies deepen understanding of antecedents that give rise to JI, but they also tend to focus on the individual level. Limited empirical research addresses JI at collective, team levels. Yet in downsizing scenarios, employees do not operate in a social vacuum. They engage in conversations and gossip about the future of the organization or team, so JI perceptions arise in inherently social contexts (Hartley, Jacobson, Klandermans, & Van Vuuren, 1990; Låstad, Vander Elst, & De Witte, 2016; Sora, Caballer, Peiró, & De Witte, 2009). In particular, teams of employees who must communicate to perform work tasks might readily spread JI perceptions, like a virus (Moran & Volkwein, 1992; Schneider & Reichers, 1983; Sora, De Cuyper, Caballer, Peiró, & De Witte, 2013). If one employee expresses concern about being powerless to maintain a job, do other members of the team start developing similar worries, in ways that affect team functioning and outcomes? That is, JI cannot be solely an individual concern, because each individual employee is embedded in groups that interact, communicate, and spread influence. Therefore, individual team members might spread their JI perceptions, consciously or unconsciously, to fellow team members or more broadly, which would produce collective JI reactions to layoffs. We refer this phenomenon as JI convergence, which we conceptualize as a pattern of increasing similarity in the affective intensity of JI perceptions among members of a team.

In line with the multilevel theory of emergence (Kozlowski, Chao, Grand, Braun, & Kuljanin, 2013; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), we propose that JI convergence represents an emergent phenomenon. As a dynamic process, convergence occurs over time; such bottom-up, multilevel processes tend to produce collective, higher-level phenomena (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; Lang, Bliese, & de Voogt, 2018). Because team members likely share common perceptions of change, such that they develop a collective response to that change (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), we predict that members’ worries about potential job losses might converge with their colleagues’ similar perceptions over time. In this compositional type of emergence, which implies strong isomorphism, JI convergence is collective and reflects all the emotional dynamics that spread among members of the team who undergo the same experience (e.g., layoffs).

In turn, our focus is on affective elements of JI (AJI), rather than its cognitive form (CJI). We prioritize these employee concerns and the emotional distress that can arise in response to threats of a job loss or related changes for three main reasons (Huang, Niu, Lee, & Ashford, 2012; Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). First, the affective aspect is the predominant facet of JI (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Kriz, Jolly, & Shoss, 2021; Lian et al., 2022). After a layoff, survivors experience emotions such as worry and fear about their own job security (Huang et al., 2012; Ito & Brotheridge, 2007; Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Kiefer, 2005). Second, AJI and CJI are conceptually distinct: CJI implies knowledge of job insecurity, but AJI occurs when a person experiences feelings of being worried or emotionally distressed about a potential loss (Huang et al., 2012; Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). People are more likely to express feelings and emotions when they confront change, so theoretically, AJI aligns more closely with their behaviors and outcomes, as confirmed by previous studies (Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017). With a meta-analysis, Jiang and Lavaysse (2018) determine that AJI has stronger links with most relevant outcomes than does CJI, and it accounts for unique incremental variance in outcomes. Third, by focusing on the affective aspect of JI, we embed our study in the notion of emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), which predicts that social contagion is a precursor of collective emotions (Le Bon, 1895) and that individual members influence the emotions of other team members by consciously or unconsciously inducing emotional states and attitudes (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield et al., 1994; Sullins, 1991). We also can leverage broader literature on emotional convergence and affective emergent phenomena (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016). Specifically, affect is more prone to transmitting attitudes and behaviors than cognition (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). Accordingly, we use the term “AJI convergence” as a precise label to refer to the collective affective intensity of JI for team members.

Then we predict that the occurrence of AJI convergence among team members prompts intrateam power struggles, marked by competitive resource acquisition (Greer & van Kleef, 2010; van Bunderen, Greer, & van Knippenberg, 2018). In line with uncertainty reduction theory, which also can predict team-level uncertainty coping strategies (e.g., Greer & van Kleef, 2010; van Bunderen, 2018), we anticipate that if team members feel uncertainty due to their fears of being laid off, and that worrisome situation is further amplified by AJI convergence, they seek power over the unsettling environment and thus engage in intrateam power struggles. Such struggles impair team performance and team proactivity, because in guarding their power and resources, team members might fail to share information, reject peers’ requests for help, or devote all their attention to protecting their own benefits (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; van Bunderen et al., 2018). By integrating uncertainty reduction theory, we further anticipate that transmitted perceptions of AJI cause damage, in the form of both power struggles and impaired team outcomes, following layoffs.

In testing these predictions, this study contributes to organizational change and JI literature in several ways. First, no organizational change ever happens in isolation, such that it likely affects everyone in an organization. An exclusive focus on individual victims’ or survivors’ responses to organizational layoffs is insufficient, yet most studies in the organizational change attitude domain investigate responses at the individual level. Such accounts provide an important base of knowledge but ignore the relevant influence of the social context and the relational dynamics among multiple people that cannot be understood in terms of independent entities (Chan, 1998; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Collective variables embody higher-order, socially interactive properties that cannot be captured by a simple aggregation of lower-order, individual variables (Bliese, 2000; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Although social contexts represent a higher level of analysis, they also are anchored in the emotions, cognitions, and behaviors of individual employees (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). We acknowledge some contributions pertaining to collective reactions to change (e.g., Bouckenooghe, Schwarz, Hastings, & de Pereny, 2019; Jeong & Shin, 2019; Rafferty, Jimmieson, & Armenakis, 2013), though these studies adopt a static approach (e.g., aggregated mean scores of reactions) that does not capture the inherently affective dynamics of teams. Furthermore, collective entities fundamentally feature some degree of convergence or consensus across members that creates higher-level properties that transcend any individual member (Chan, 1998; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016). When team members develop shared views of and responses to organizational change, through social interactions, a collective property emerges and exists at the team level. Therefore, we need a clearer understanding of the process by which change recipients’ collective reactions to change emerge. We posit that convergence is relevant, in that it can predict the team’s collective receptivity to change as it develops over time, and we propose a multilevel theoretical framework of this collective concept of AJI convergence and its consequences in a layoff context. Examining the convergence of AJI over time thus extends organizational change attitude literature that predominantly pertains to the individual level.

Second, convergence processes involving AJI rarely have been addressed; with our multilevel theory of composition emergence, we explore whether and how the affective aspects of JI perceptions converge among team members as collective phenomena over time. We thereby respond to calls, in both organizational change and JI literature, for more multilevel examinations of JI processes (Låstad, Näswall, Berntson, Seddigh, & Sverke, 2018; Sora et al., 2013), with particular attention to how JI operates at distinct theoretical levels.

Third, we provide new insights into the effects of AJI on employee performance and outcomes in a social context (Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017), because we include team members’ internal power struggles and outcomes in job-insecure team contexts. Even though prior studies acknowledge the existence of power struggles and recognize that people strategically compete to improve their positions in organizations (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Greer & van Kleef, 2010), scant empirical research has addressed the effects of power struggles within teams, especially after layoffs. We provide a new perspective on how members react to their own sense of powerlessness over their jobs and uncertainty, in line with uncertainty reduction theory.

Fourth, our findings offer clear recommendations to both team members and team leaders: They should pay close attention to the phenomenon of AJI convergence after layoffs. Converging to high levels of AJI is detrimental for team functioning and outcomes, due to the unavoidable power struggles they induce.

**Theory and Hypotheses**

**The Concept of AJI Convergence**

Technological, organizational, and internal or external changes to organizations can prompt downsizing initiatives, as a conventional management response, which increase perceived job insecurity (Keim et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018). Prior studies note some psychological implications of JI, mainly using an individual unit of analysis (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018), and outline how individual employees subject to organizational change tend to react (e.g., Spreitzer & Mishra, 2002; van Dierendonck & Jacobs, 2012; West, 2000), including how they experience AJI (Keim et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2018). Worrying about job loss is not just a personal concern. It also exists at a societal level, as reflected in change recipients’ collective reactions to organizational change. In studies of the harmful impacts of team-level JI (or the JI climate) that results from organizational change, JI climate usually gets defined by data gathered at the individual level, then aggregated to the team level, and the specified outcomes include diminished job satisfaction, work involvement, organizational commitment, and organizational trust (e.g., Sora et al., 2009, 2013). Låstad et al. (2018) measure the JI climate by asking individual members directly about their perceptions. These studies suggest that JI is a social phenomenon, but static approaches cannot reveal JI as an emergent team process. Yet AJI clearly fluctuates over time, and emergence takes time to unfold and manifest. When a layoff exercise begins, members may not necessarily share the same degrees of individual AJI. As team members interact and talk about the layoff though, AJI convergence likely develops.

Kozlowski and Klein (2000) propose a typology of distinct forms of emergence, ranging from composition to compilation, which can be distinguished by the underlying theoretical assumptions. Composition implies an assumption of isomorphism, such that individual members’ perceptions, feelings, and behaviors grow more similar in response to the same content. Composition instead describes how collective phenomena emerge in teams when team members communicate, interact, and exchange information and ideas, while also sharing a common goal or work context. Thus, a hallmark of composition emergence is convergence; team members must share a common view or response to change to develop a collective response (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016; Kozlowski & Chao, 2012; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). In contrast, compilation emergence implies that the contributions individual members make to the collective are variable, not shared or consistent. In this view, collective responses to change might emerge from complex patterns of individual change responses, but those responses are not necessarily shared among team members (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016; Kozlowski & Chao, 2012; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). We adopt the former, composition emergence notion to anticipate the convergence of AJI over time, because collective AJI phenomena likely emerge through a process that facilitates the convergence of shared AJI perceptions of a layoff exercise. This context provides a collective setting for transmitting members’ AJI perceptions, facilitating their shared perceptions of the extent to which they need to worry about being powerless to maintain a job. These feelings of AJI likely become more similar over time and lead to the composition emergence of collective AJI to change.

This theorizing also hinges on contagion by AJI, in line with evidence that affect can converge and emerge due to emotional contagion (Collins, Lawrence, Troth, & Jordan, 2013; Uy et al., 2021). Psychologists define collective emotions as the synchronous convergence of affective responses toward a specific event or object, through a process of emotional contagion (Parkinson, 2020). Emotional contagion in the workplace occurs when the emotions and behaviors of one employee lead to the reflexive production of the same emotions and behaviors by other employees. We might think of emotional contagion like catching a cold: The “virus” is an emotion, and anyone who catches it is subject to infection and can pass it on to others. The notion of emotional contagion also acknowledges primitive emotional mimicry processes. When people engage in primitive emotional mimicry, they mimic and synchronize another person’s facial expressions, postures, and movements automatically, which encourages convergence in their emotions too (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992). For example, when one person starts giggling during a meeting, other participants tend to start laughing; fears of COVID-19 spread widely throughout the world at the height of the pandemic (Wheaton, Prikhidko, & Messner, 2021). Emotional contagion results from interactions of various people, such as mothers and infants (Waters, West, Karnilowicz, & Mendes, 2017), leaders and subordinates (Pindek, Lucianetti, Kessler, & Spector, 2020; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), team members (Jehn, Rispens, Jonsen, & Greer, 2013; Parkinson, 2020), teachers and students (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016), and service providers and customers (Du, Fan, & Feng, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006; Pugh, 2001). Stress contagion in particular, as a strongly negative emotion (Blanco-Donoso et al., 2021; Lazarus, 1993), can involve spouses (Bakker, Demerouti, & Dollard, 2008; Waters et al., 2017; Westman, Vinokur, Hamilton, & Roziner, 2004), roommates in dorms (Joiner, 2003), colleagues (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2000; Petitta & Jiang, 2020), or even work-from-home colleagues (Blanco-Donoso et al., 2021).

In organizational behavior literature pertaining to team-level emotional contagion, Barsade (2002) proposes that team members continuously influence one another’s emotions and behaviors. During interactions, each member tends to reflect the emotional state of the other person through emotional mimicry, which is automatic (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999) and induces convergent subjective feelings (Hatfield et al., 1994). In confirmatory evidence of mimicry-based emotional contagion, Dimberg, Thunberg, and Elmehed (2000) measure people’s spontaneous reactions using distinct facial electromyographic gauges of emotion-relevant facial muscles after being exposed to others’ angry and happy faces. Walter and Bruch (2008) also propose a group effect spiral, such that one member’s emotions quickly transfer to other team members and initiate a self-reinforcing spiral as that emotional contagion continues to spread. Primitive emotional mimicry is sufficient for emotional contagion in teams, because members can easily catch the emotions of those with whom they closely interact (Barsade, 2002). Bakker et al. (2008) in particular demonstrate that expressions of distress, dissatisfaction, or exhaustion produce corresponding observed and self-reported emotions in others. With multiple waves of data from Russian military couples, Westman et al. (2004) show how distress experienced by one spouse can transmit to the other. The primitive process of emotional contagion involves a relatively subconscious, automatic transmission of emotion, due to mimicry (Barsade, 2002). Negative emotions, such as being depressed, fearful, and anxious, can be readily observed in facial expressions, postures, and body movements (Critchley & Nagai, 2012). In interactions with team members who display such negative emotions, colleagues likely experience the symptoms of feeling depressed, fearful, and stressed too (Totterdell, Hershcovis, Niven, Reich, & Stride, 2012; Zagenczyk, Powell, & Scott, 2020). Such primitive emotional mimicry implies that team members see others’ AJI, then imitate and synchronize with it, such that these observations tend to increase the strength of members’ own insecure feelings about their job. Members then perceive that they share the same worries, which evokes widespread AJI transmission.

Emotional contagion feeds on itself and grows over time to manifest as a collective, emergent phenomenon. It may spread beyond dyads to get the wider group into sync (Parkinson, 2020). As we have noted, the emotional states of team members tend to converge over time (Fulmer & Ostroff, 2016), and convergence processes effectively account for team members’ tendencies to feel and behave in collective ways (Owens & Hekman, 2016; Totterdell, Kellett, Teuchmann, & Briner, 1998). Collective emotions thus arise (Goldenberg, Garcia, Halperin, & Gross, 2020; von Scheve & Ismer, 2013). According to the multilevel theory of emergence (Kozlowski et al., 2013; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), composition emergence occurs in work teams when individual affect (or behaviors or attitudes) gets amplified by interactions, such that it manifests as a higher-level, collective phenomenon, reflecting all emotional dynamics that appear among employees subject to the same context (i.e., layoff initiatives in this study). Emotional dynamics refer to emotional contagion and synchronous convergence in affective responses to a specific event (Goldenberg et al., 2020; Smith & Mackie, 2016). According to George (1996), when team members’ emotional levels are consistent, a broader “affective tone” arises and serves as social information to guide members’ actions (Parkinson, 1996). In summary, noting evidence that JI is a common (negative) reaction to organizational changes (Shoss, 2017), we hypothesize that team members influence one another’s AJI perceptions, because they express their AJI and get exposed to others’ AJI, especially after layoffs. As such, the AJI of work team members tends to converge over time. Formally, we predict:

*H1. AJI convergence occurs among team members over time following layoffs.*

**Consequences of AJI Convergence**

Employees do not want to wait passively to be laid off, so it is pertinent to examine how they react to collective AJI convergence in uncertain change contexts. Convergence should create a collective sense of AJI that may push teams to take action. Yet it is insufficient to consider only the main effect of collective AJI convergence on team consequences, because our conceptualization entails the increasing similarity of AJI among team members over time. An AJI convergence effect might involve increasing similarity of JI at a generally higher level or increasing similarity of AJI at a lower level. Some teams may include members who converge to a high level of AJI, while others feature members converging to a low or modest level. We thus adopt Uy et al.’s (2021) theorizing about the effect of passion convergence to predict that the impact of AJI convergence on team outcomes is moderated by the end state of AJI, toward which team members are converging.

As team members converge to a high level of AJI, due to layoffs, they suffer uncertainty, fear, worry, and a sense of being lost. Employees likely wonder how long they can keep their jobs or worry they will not be able to find jobs elsewhere. Such a context induces conflict and competition, because the more worried people are about losing their jobs, the more they seek to make visible contributions and ensure their supervisors are aware of those contributions, as a protective mechanism (Shoss, Su, Schlotzhauer, & Carusone, 2022). Active coping attempts also might include proactive efforts to manage, modify, or prevent subsequently escalated feelings of JI (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Langerak, Koen, & van Hooft, in press). As suggested by research into how teams cope with uncertainty (e.g., Greer & van Kleef, 2010; van Bunderen, 2018), we adopt uncertainty reduction theory. That is, uncertainty evokes a sense of insufficient control, which motivates people to seek to regain their sense of control as a way to cope (Greenberger & Strasser, 1986). In particular, they might compete for more power, as a means to replenish their sense of control in uncertain contexts (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; van Bunderen et al., 2018). Power within teams is finite, so one member’s power gain implies another member’s power loss (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Competition for power in uncertain settings likely leads to intrateam power struggles (van Bunderen, 2018). Rather than working cooperatively, members fight over internal resources, in their attempt to control others, mitigate their uncertainty, and protect their resources. In line with this reasoning, we predict that when team members are converging to a high level of AJI, they compete for resources and control, to protect themselves and cope with the aversive situation, resulting in prominent power struggles. In contrast, if members are converging to a low level of AJI, they worry less about losing their jobs and may be less likely to fight for resources or power. In summary,

*H2. The positive relationship between AJI convergence and intrateam power struggles is stronger if the state of AJI toward which members are converging is high.*

A competitive coping strategy can impair team performance and team proactivity. Power struggles distract members from their work (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995; van Bunderen et al., 2018), because employees focus on maximizing their self-interest and managing their own resources rather than attending to their daily work tasks. Moreover, power struggles tend to damage members’ relationships, in that team members engage in competitive behaviors such as sabotaging, undermining, purposely withholding important information, or refusing to cooperate (van Bunderen et al., 2018), which are crucial to team performance (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). In addition, power struggles tend to be unpleasant and political, so employees subjected to them are less likely to proactively seek improvements at work and instead might behave unethically (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Petrou, Bakker, & Bezemer, 2019). Their proactive efforts already are risky, because leaders might respond negatively (Bolino, Turnley, & Anderson, 2017; Lanaj & Jennings, 2020) or their action might not be welcomed by supervisors and colleagues (Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014; Grant & Ashford, 2008). As such, power struggles decrease the likelihood of proactive efforts, shifting members’ attention to their own concerns and agendas related to control and resources. When team members converge to a high level of AJI, we predict that their competition for resources and control intensifies, so they focus even less on team activities and responsibilities. If power struggles disrupt effective teamwork and impede team performance and team proactivity, we accordingly anticipate a mediated moderation effect:

*H3. Intrateam power struggles mediate the effect of AJI convergence at a high level on (a) team performance and (b) team proactivity after layoffs*.

Figure 1 depicts the proposed research model.

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ---

**Methodology**

**Research Context and Data Collection**

We collected data from a large textile company in northern China, with a long history (more than 30 years) of competing in the textile industry. Its business is varied and broad, such that it engages in raw material processing and producing, R&D for new clothing materials, manufacturing, designing, and retailing. The company maintains a detailed division of labor and many working teams within each department. For example, the procurement department consists of 12 working teams, specified by fabrics, such as cotton, linen, silk, wool, leather, chemical fibers, and blends. Our study samples include members of the R&D, design, sales, production, procurement, and marketing departments. Team leaders/supervisors, officially appointed by the company, have formal authority over team operations. In their hierarchical relationships, team leaders are direct supervisors of team members, and members report to them. Finally, the company has a functional organizational structure, so it is rare for work units to conduct joint projects in which employees might solve problems in a matrix team.

The company’s business was negatively affected by COVID-19. The sales director, 17 employees, and 8 team leaders all agreed, in our interviews with them, that their business had been harmed by the pandemic; many customers cancelled or delayed purchase orders. In response, the company sought to downsize, by 15% of its total employee rolls, to increase its competitiveness. However, not all work teams were affected equally; core business teams such as children’s clothing R&D were not affected, but traditional and materials design teams lost even more than 15% of their members. The majority of affected teams lost a few team members rather than the entire team.

---- Insert Figure 2 about here ----

As Figure 2 shows, employees returned to in-person work on March 27, 2020, subsequent to the outbreak of COVID-19 in China in January 2020. Although the company had no formal social distancing policy, all employees were required to wear masks and submit to weekly nucleic acid tests. On April 15, 2020, the top management team held meetings to discuss the company’s challenges and financial difficulties; they reached a decision to institute layoffs starting April 20. In our interview, the CEO indicated that the company attempted to execute layoffs subtly, in the hope of minimizing any sudden negative effects and maintaining its corporate image. A human resources (HR) manager and line manager jointly notified individual employees subject to layoffs, but the company did not openly announce the initiative. The personal, one-on-one meetings were designed to offer exiting employees space to address any confusion. Furthermore, the company paid sufficient layoff compensations, in line with current labor laws. Based on our in-depth interviews of the company’s HR manager about the layoff agenda and timeline, we chose Time 1, a week after the substantial layoff, to ask the 144 leaders and 771 subordinates still employed by the firm to complete a survey. We interviewed the company CEO and 21 layoff survivors, most of whom expressed concerns about future layoffs, to which they worried they might fall victim.

A 15-minute research orientation, preceding the survey administration, emphasized that respondents’ participation was voluntary and that all responses were confidential and would be used only for research purposes. Each subordinate and his or her team leader was assigned a unique code, so that we could match their responses; the codes were printed on the questionnaires. The participants were instructed to put the completed questionnaires into an envelope, seal it, and submit it directly to the researchers on site.

Then, to test the AJI convergence process, we applied a four-wave research design. On April 20, 2020, the layoff happened; the Time 1 survey took place on April 28. Each subsequent survey wave was separated by two weeks. At Time 1, 131 team leaders and 679 subordinates returned the filled surveys, for usable response rates of 90.97% and 88.06%, respectively. At Time 2 (May 15, approximately two weeks after Time 1), 117 team leaders and 604 subordinates returned the filled surveys, leading to response rates of 89.31% and 88.95%, respectively. At Time 3 (May 29, two weeks after Time 2), the 100 team leaders and 544 subordinates represented response rates of 85.47% and 90.06%. Finally, at Time 4 (June 14, two weeks after Time 3), 91 team leaders and 468 subordinates represented response rates of 91.00% and 86.02%, respectively. This group represents our final sample. That is, only completed responses for the entirety of Time 1 to Time 4 were included in the data set and analyses. Furthermore, we required each team to provide responses from at least three members (in addition to their supervisor) to be included; teams with fewer than three member responses were excluded from the data set. Each respondent received an incentive of RMB10 *yuan* (~USD1.5) for returning each completed survey. Among the 468 employee respondents, 48.08% were women. The average age was 32.6 years (SD = 5.97), with an average organizational tenure of 10.87 years (SD = 3.40) and team tenure of 4.92 years (SD = 2.06). Furthermore, 45.51% of the subordinates had at least a college degree. Among the 91 team leaders, 62.64% were women, their average age was 32.37 years (SD = 6.47), 52.75% had a college degree or above, their average organizational tenure was 6.27 years (SD = 3.15), and their average team tenure was 4.70 years (SD = 2.02). The average team size was 5.14 members (SD = 1.13).

**Measures**

We used two separate sets of questionnaires for subordinates and their leaders. Members self-reported their demographic characteristics (Time 1), AJI (Times 1, 2, 3, and 4), and intrateam power struggles (Time 4). Team leaders provided ratings of team performance (Time 4) and team proactivity (Time 4). The questionnaire items were originally written in English, then translated into Chinese using double-blind back-translation (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973).

**Affective job insecurity (AJI)**.We assessed subordinates’ AJI using 10 items from Huang et al. (2012). A sample item was: “The lack of job security in this company makes me feel nervous” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were .97, .97, .96, and .96 at Times 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

**Intrateam power struggles**. We assessed intrateam power struggles with three items from Van Bunderen et al. (2018), modified in accordance with Greer and van Kleef (2010). A sample item was: “My team members have disagreements about who has control in the team” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (α = .84). In an analysis of variance, we find that intrateam power struggles (*F*(50, 104) = 1.89, *p* < .01) differ significantly across teams. The intra-class correlations for this variable were ICC1 = .21 and ICC2 = .58, and the interrater agreement was rwg = .79, which indicates high between-team variance and within-team agreement (Bliese, 2000). When calculating the interrater agreement (rwg), we used a slightly skewed null distribution (LeBreton & Senter, 2008) for individual intrateam power struggles, because employees might start to worry about losing their jobs following layoffs. Before testing H2 and H3, we aggregated the intrateam power struggles measure to the team level.

**Team performance**. Team leaders rated team performance with a three-item measure developed by De Jong and Elfring (2010), such that they indicated how the performance of the focal team compares with the performance of teams engaged in similar tasks, on three aspects: quality of output, quantity of output, and overall assessment of team performance (1 = very poor, 7 = superb) (α = .95).

**Team proactivity**. For team proactivity, we used three items from Griffin, Neal, and Parker (2007), rated by team leaders, such as “Team members developed new and improved methods to help the work team performs better” (1 = never, 7 = very often) (α = .95).

**Control variables**. We controlled for CJI at Time 1 when testing the hypotheses, because the concept of job insecurity includes both CJI and AJI dimensions. We assessed subordinates’ CJI with 10 items from Oldham, Kulik, Stepina, and Ambrose (1986), such as “My job is not a secure one” (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) (α = .96).

To test H2 and H3, we also controlled for team size, because our research was embedded in a team context; we measured it as the number of members on a team. We also controlled for team members’ age diversity, tenure diversity, gender diversity, and education diversity, which can have important effects on team members’ interactions (Joshi & Roh, 2009). We used the coefficient of variation (standard deviation divided by the group mean) for age and tenure, because they are continuous demographic variables; we used the Blau (1977) index for gender and education (lower than college, college or above). We also followed Uy et al. (2021) and included each team’s AJI similarity at the start of the study (T1) to control for between-team differences in the initial level of AJI similarity.

**Analytical Strategy**

To test H1, related to whether AJI convergence occurs among team members over time, we used a consensus emergence model (CEM), as developed by Lang et al. (2018). This statistical approach allows researchers to study the emergence of shared perceptions and feelings in groups over time. As Lang et al. (2018) point out, the conceptual rationale for the CEM involves systematically modeling changes in residual variances over time, to provide insights into the emergence of consensus. Therefore, CEM provides a relevant approach for determining how team members’ AJI becomes more (or less) similar over time after layoffs, in that it can account for dynamic changes in group consensus. As suggested by Lang et al. (2018), we use three-level CEM specifications. The criterion variable is the change in residual variance; a negative coefficient would indicate that residual variance decreases over time, that is, that AJI convergence is occurring.

We rely on Mplus 8.3 to test whether the positive relationship between AJI convergence and intrateam power struggles is stronger if the end state of AJI toward which members are converging is high (H2) and if intrateam power struggles mediate this effect of AJI convergence at a high level on team performance (H3a) and team proactivity (H3b). On the basis of our CEM analysis, we estimate team-specific coefficients, which indicate each team’s pattern of AJI convergence over time. These coefficients reflect the slopes that capture changes in the level of similarity (or dissimilarity) in AJI. To estimate each team’s AJI similarity at the start of the study, we use the intercept obtained from the model we used to estimate each team’s pattern of AJI convergence. To facilitate interpretation, we reversed the direction of the scores, by subtracting from 4. Thus, the original measurement level remains intact; we just reverse the direction of the variable (Sy & Choi, 2013) to allow larger scores to denote greater similarity. To measure the level of AJI toward which members are converging, we used the team-aggregated individual AJI measures from Time 4. The tests of both H2 and H3 included the interaction of the team-specific coefficient of AJI convergence (slope) and team members’ average level of AJI at Time 4 as the independent variable. All variables were grand-mean centered before the analyses.

**Results**

Table 1 contains the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the team-level variables.

---- Insert Table 1 about here ----

Table 2 presents the results of the omnibus likelihood test of whether AJI convergence exists over time. The difference between Model 1b and Model 1a is significant (*χ2* = 15.96, *p* < .001), which indicates that including an exponential variance function increases model fit. The model estimates are in Table 3; it reveals that the exponential variance function weight for time is 𝛿1 = -.17 (*p* < .01). Using formulas provided by Lang et al. (2018) and Uy et al. (2021), we calculate estimates of the residual variance, based on the model parameters for Model 1b (Table 3). The residual variance shifts, from .36 at Time 1 to .13 at Time 4. Integrating these findings, we can conclude that within-group residual variance in the data decreases significantly over time, which signals the occurrence of AJI convergence, in support of H1.

---- Insert Tables 2 & 3 about here ----

Figure 3 depicts the H2 and H3 results. In Model B, the standardized coefficient (*β* = .81, *SE* = .12, *p* < .001) indicates that AJI convergence significantly relates to intrateam power struggles if the state to which members are converging is high AJI. The simple slopes tests, conducted at high (+1 SD from the mean; *b* = 1.35, *p* < .001) and low (-1 SD from the mean; *b* = .27, *p* < .05) levels of team AJI, reveal that AJI convergence positively influences intrateam power struggles when team members converge to a high level of AJI, but it has a negative influence when team members converge to a low level (Figure 4). Thus, we find support for H2.

---- Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here ----

In the test of H3 (Model A, Figure 3), the standardized coefficients show that AJI convergence significantly and negatively relates to team performance (*β* = -.45, *SE* = .15, *p* < .01) and team proactivity (*β* = -.81, *SE* = .13, *p* < .001) when the state of AJI toward which members are converging is high. In Model B, after controlling for the mediating effect of intrateam power struggles, the standardized coefficients of AJI convergence at a high level become non-significant with regard to team performance (*β* = -.07, *SE* = .16, *n.s.*) and less significant for team proactivity (*β* = -.45, *SE* = .14, *p* < .01). The indirect effects of AJI convergence at a high level, through intrateam power struggles, on team performance (*β* = -.38, *SE* = .11, *p* < .001) and team proactivity (*β* = -.36, *SE* = .10, *p* < .001) are both significant and negative. Thus, H3a receives full support, but H3b is only partially supported.

To clarify this partial mediating effect (H3b), we conduct simple slopes tests at high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of team AJI, pertaining to the relationships between AJI convergence and team proactivity when we control for the mediator (i.e., intrateam power struggles) or not. Figure 5 contains the results when we do not control for this mediator (high team AJI: *b* = -1.00, *p* < .001; low team AJI: *b* = .62, *p* < .001), and Figure 6 depicts them when we impose this control (high team AJI: *b* = -.40, *p* < .05; low team AJI: *b* = .50, *p* < .01). The plots suggest that the influence of AJI convergence on team proactivity decreases significantly if we control for the intrateam power struggles (significance level falls from *p* < .001 to *p* < .05). These results further confirm the partial support for H3b.

---- Insert Figures 5 & 6 about here ----

**Discussion**

Employees face precarious employment situations, reflecting the global scales of job losses and layoffs. Downsizing is a trigger of JI (Keim et al., 2014; West, 2000). Employees worry about job continuity, and such worries can be transmitted to and influence others within teams, such that AJI convergence occurs. Drawing on a multilevel theory of emergence (Kozlowski et al., 2013; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), we develop a theoretical model of AJI convergence after layoffs. Our findings offer credible support for the existence of AJI convergence among team members, as we predicted in H1, and confirm that when employees begin to worry about job continuity, they do not necessarily exhibit the same degrees of AJI. As they interact with other members of the team though, AJI convergence can develop over time. With the tests of H2 and H3, we show that when members converge to a high level of AJI, it can create intrateam power struggles, because team members attempt to alleviate their uncertainty by obtaining greater power and control. Such strategies ultimately impair team performance and team proactivity.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Extant research on JI is replete with individual subjective perceptions (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Shoss, 2017), even though worrying about job continuity tends to spread and become a team perception (Låstad et al., 2018; Sora et al., 2013). Sora et al. (2009) assert that a JI group climate influences employees’ job satisfaction and commitment, beyond the negative influence of individual perceptions. Similarly, Jiang and Probst (2016) conclude that an AJI climate can predict work safety outcomes (e.g., compliance, injuries), substantially beyond that explained by individual JI. These findings establish a social effect of JI in teams; they do not specify how shared emotional reactions to possible job losses, characterized by anxiety and fear, might be created though. Team members likely interact to seek information about the future of the organization after layoffs, so their perceptions of AJI might be easily transmitted. Through the spread of rumors or discussion about the future of the organization, as well as general negative impressions, AJI convergence arises, such that team members’ AJI becomes more similar over time because the affective intensity of JI gets transmitted throughout the work team. In indirect support of this reasoning, studies of downsizing note that people use others’ experiences and perceptions to define their own (Kalimo, Taris, & Schaufeli, 2003). We agree with Låstad et al. (2018) that studies of JI can be effectively informed by a team dynamics lens and thus build on the multilevel theory of emergence—a collective multilevel theory that predicts dynamic patterns of synchronous convergence in affect over time (Kozlowski et al., 2013; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000)—to develop the concept of AJI convergence. In establishing the process by which the affective intensity of JI spreads, from the individual to the collective, team level, we also recommend that continued research into the social contexts of AJI in workplaces attend to social convergence effects. More broadly, we theorize about and measure collective reactions to organizational change events; such contexts require considerations of the content, process, and contingent factors that can predict collective reactions to organizational change. Our study offers important implications for organizational change attitude literature that predominantly addresses the individual level, in that it offers theorizing and empirical tests of the occurrence of AJI convergence and its impacts at the collective, team level.

Leveraging previous research on aggregated individual JI, along with uncertainty reduction theory, we confirm that AJI convergence induces intrateam power struggles, impairs team performance, and reduces team proactivity when team members converge to a high level of AJI. The uncertain situation created by layoffs exposes team members to resource threats, raising their concerns and tendency to undertake behaviors that might secure their jobs and resources. By establishing intrateam power struggles as a key mediating factor of the collective AJI convergence effect, we also contribute to growing literature on the social context for JI (usually represented as aggregated individual JI or JI team climate in prior studies) and its influence on team outcomes (e.g., Låstad et al., 2018; Sora et al., 2013). Intrateam power struggles provide an underlying mechanism that governs the effect of AJI convergence at a higher level on team outcomes. It may be meaningful to explore other mediating mechanisms too, such as team cohesion or intrateam intrigue, that might explain the relationship further.

It may be hard to prevent AJI convergence, considering its rather automatic and unconscious nature, but employees, leaders, and organizations all would benefit from efforts to mitigate it. As our results reveal, employees’ AJI perceptions can be transmitted and exert wide influences, which generally is not desirable for themselves or their team. If the future is uncertain, being “mindful” may help. Being mindful entails working to stay focused, without letting the mind wander into a spiral of uncertain, unpleasant scenarios (Bracci, 2020). Such efforts foster objectivity and nonjudgmental stances in various situations, which should help people start to feel more comfortable with uncertainty or aware of changes (Bracci, 2020). Our findings about the likelihood of increased power struggles in the face of insecurity also have practical ramifications for managers. Layoffs are heartbreaking, but they might not be the most emotionally challenging aspect (Hamid Rao, 2021); uncertainty is. Employees worry for weeks about the threat of job loss, and as rumors and whispers circulate, the pain and discomfort of their uncertainty increases even further. Being exposed to uncertainty and negative anticipation takes a heavy toll on employee well-being and health (Pollard, 2001). When AJI results in competitive power struggles, it also can undermine team outcomes. Team leaders therefore must seek ways to reduce survivors’ uncertainty following layoffs; Kriz et al. (2021) suggest active listening as an important tactic to boost employees’ sense of control and reduce their uncertainty. Active listening by leaders even can have ripple effects, by increasing employees’ perceived control and decreasing their AJI. Organizations thus should train leaders to be better listeners. If time and resources allow, they also should establish a clear, ethical, reasonable, and positive layoff strategy, then communicate transparently about the reasons for downsizing, the impacts on victims and survivors, and the support available to them, which can help offset uncertainty. The benefits of a carefully planned downsizing strategy also are evident in Cameron’s (1994) study of 30 organizations that engaged in downsizing over a four-year period. We hope additional research might establish empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such organizational interventions by simulating the effects of leader or organizational support on AJI convergence and outcomes.

**Limitations and Further Research Directions**

Our study has several notable strengths, including the time-lagged data collection in the context of an organization undergoing layoff initiatives. However, like all studies, it is not without limitations. One such constraint pertains to the timing of our data collection, which occurred after the first layoff. When COVID-19 hit, the textile industry was one of the first to feel its effects; in China, production slowed almost to a halt (*The Baltic Times*, 2021). The textile company we study experienced a huge drop in volume and revenue, so its top management team promptly decided to downsize, shortly after employees returned to in-person work. The layoffs were unexpected before the first lockdown in China though (January 2020), and we did not conduct any surveys before these layoffs took place. Instead, we collected the first wave one week after the layoff, when employees were aware that if the company could not recover, their jobs would be in jeopardy too. To build on our findings, researchers might seek a similar, somewhat more predictable downsizing event to be able to conduct “before-and-after” surveys.

We also cannot confidently generalize the findings to other cultural contexts, even though downsizing and layoffs are global phenomena (Andersen, 2022). We posit that AJI convergence and reactions to it are similar across national cultures. Still, as Debus, Probst, König, and Kleinmann (2012) find, in their study of 15,200 employees from 24 counties, employees in countries that score high on uncertainty avoidance (i.e., extensive norms, rules, and procedures in place to alleviate uncertainty) who experience JI also have a clearer ideas about what will happen and how they will be protected in the event of a job loss, so they might have less negative reactions to JI than employees in cultures with low levels of uncertainty avoidance. Bluszcz and Quan (2016) categorize China as a low uncertainty avoidance culture, comfortable with ambiguity. Thus, the findings might differ somewhat in cultures marked by high uncertainty avoidance. We acknowledge this limitation as a worthy consideration for additional research that could compare findings gathered from both high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures.

The phenomenon of AJI convergence in reaction to change is critical to understand; it also would be valuable to explore specific factors that encourage teams to converge to lower or higher levels of AJI. The existence of emergence phenomena, and their variability, largely reflects team characteristics, team experience, and relevant team entities (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Identifying factors that facilitate or inhibit AJI convergence thus would provide a rich perspective onto change contexts. Research into social ties in organizations indicates that friendship ties and work ties are critical for facilitating information sharing, decision-making, and socializing (Brass, 1984; Morrison, 2002; Totterdell, Wall, Holman, Diamond, & Epitropaki, 2004); additional research could test whether the quality of such ties among team members determines the emergence of higher-level (or collective) change responses. We study AJI convergence among employees within teams but not across their social networks in the organizations. Convergence effects might be more salient within teams, in which employees work in similar contexts and likely share similar concerns, fears, and worries. Belonging to the same team facilitates emotional contagion and the interpersonal transfer of emotions, and group membership heightens the chances of being exposed to similar, emotionally relevant events (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005). This reasoning underlies our decision to examine AJI convergence within teams, but ongoing research efforts also could explore how social networks facilitate AJI convergence. Such an exploration would be particularly relevant to companies that use flatter or matrix structures, with employees who work closely across departments.

Finally, we acknowledge the possibility that emotional transmission can occur among team members repeatedly, in a reciprocal spiral. An anxious team member who worries about losing a job can induce others to become anxious, and then those others can return their escalated anxiety to the focal team member, sparking a vicious cycle of interpersonal transfer of emotions (Hareli & Hess, 2010). We do not test for boundary conditions of our hypothesized relationships either. Our focus on the process of AJI convergence may exclude contextual effects and boundary conditions, such as those that might stem from personal traits or situational factors. For example, do neurotic people, who tend to be more sensitive to stressors, increase the AJI convergence effect? Does job mobility decrease it? Research that tests these questions could establish important factors that stimulate AJI convergence and the outcomes that result.

**Conclusion**

Because AJI could be convergent, slowing its transmission among employees is critical during layoffs. This study demonstrates that team members who attend to the same unpleasant context facilitate emotional connections, escalating to a collective, team-level AJI convergence phenomenon. We hope the theory we propose and the findings we establish spur further investigations of this process to advance understanding, in research that theorizes about and measures collective reactions to organizational change events.

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*Table 2.*

Extended consensus emergence models (CEM): Model comparisons

Versus previous model

*AIC*

*BIC*

Log likelihood

*df*

*χ*

*2*

Model 1a: Three-level model, no emergence

5842.78

5880.12

-2912.39

9

Model 1b: Three-level CEM

5840.72

5882.21

-2910.36

10

15.96

\*\*\*

*Note.*

\*\*\*

*p*

< .001. For both models,

*N*

= 1872 observations nested in 468 team members and 91 teams.

*AIC*

= Akaike Information Criterion.

*BIC*

= Bayesian Information Criterion.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 3.* Extended consensus emergence model: Model estimates for AJI convergence | | |
|  | Dependent variable = AJI | |
| Parameter | Model 1a | Model 1b |
| Intercept, 𝛾000 | 1.52\*\*\* | 1.52\*\*\* |
| TIME, 𝛾100 | .05 | .05 |
| Group intercept variance, | .65\*\*\* | .67\*\*\* |
| Group variation for TIME, | .01 | .02 |
| Covariance, 𝜎𝛽00𝛽10 | -.07\* | -.07\* |
| Person intercept variance, | 1.60\*\*\* | 1.53\*\*\*  .46\*\* |
| CJI (T1) on Intercept  CJI (T1) on TIME  Residual variance, | .31\*\*\*  .46\*\*  -.01 | .36\*\*\*  -.01 |
| TIME, 𝛿1 |  | -.17\*\* |
| \* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001. |  |  |
| Notes: For both models, *N* = 1872 observations nested in 468 team members and 91 teams. AJI = Affective job insecurity. CJI = Cognitive job insecurity. T1 = Time 1. | | |



Shape

Description automatically generated with medium confidence



Chart

Description automatically generated

*Figure 4*. Interaction between AJI convergence and team AJI on intrateam power struggles

Diagram

Description automatically generated

*Figure 5*. Interaction between AJI convergence and team AJI on team proactivity without controlling for intrateam power struggles

*Figure 6*. Interaction between AJI convergence and team AJI on team proactivity, controlling for intrateam power struggles