

## EDITORIAL

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### **Job insecurity – The East side story**

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#### **Why a new special issue on job insecurity?**

Job insecurity, often defined as subjective concerns about the continued existence of the actual job (Van Vuuren, 1990), or as the perceived threat of job loss and the worries related to that threat (De Witte, 2005), is a topic that gained extensive research interest from scholars during the last decades. Multiple overview chapters and meta-analyses have been published during the past 30 years (De Witte, 1999 and 2005; De Witte, De Cuyper, Vander Elst et al., 2012; De Witte, Vander Elst & De Cuyper, 2015a; Ferrie, 2001; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 2010; Probst, 2008; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002; for meta-analyses, see: Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke, Hellgren & Näswall, 2002), and the topic has also been subject to several special issues of scientific journals (Klandermans & Van Vuuren, 1999; Reisel & Probst, 2010; Sverke, 2003; Sverke, De Witte, Näswall & Hellgren, 2010). The interest of scientists in job insecurity and its consequences is of course understandable, as our societies have all been undergoing important economic changes, ranging from continuous conversion to turbulence and plain upheaval. It thus comes as no surprise that meta-analyses underpin the detrimental impact of job insecurity, by showing that it is negatively associated with important outcomes such as job satisfaction, mental and physical health, organizational commitment, trust in management and performance (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). A recent overview of longitudinal research underpins the conclusion that job

insecurity impacts on health and well-being, rather than the other way round, offering cogent evidence for a causal link between job insecurity and its outcomes (De Witte, Pienaar & De Cuyper, 2015b). Reviewing the various studies however also demonstrates that the reported empirical evidence is largely stemming from a somewhat restricted set of countries, with a clear dominance of Western Europe (and most notably Scandinavian countries), and to a lesser extent also Canada and the US. This corroborates the view of Kang, Staniford, Dollard and Kompier (2008) who stated that most studies within Occupational Health Psychology originate from Europe, Canada and the US, thus ignoring a large amount of the world.

This conclusion is especially true when one looks at Eastern Europe. Given the profound political and economic changes that have been taking place in Eastern Europe, the finding that only limited knowledge has been gained on job insecurity in this part of Europe is surprising. Additional differences in the structure of labour markets, legislation, culture and historical and political heritage make it all the more interesting to examine job insecurity in this part of Europe. These observations are also valid for Oriental countries, such as Turkey, Syria and China. Therefore, this special issue was developed in order to bridge this gap, and has a double aim. First of all, researchers from 'non West European' countries were invited to present some of their research findings on job insecurity, in order to examine the consequences of job insecurity in their countries. Second, their studies offer a unique

opportunity to other parts of the world to learn from findings stemming from a 'non West European' context. Including countries outside the 'ordinary scope' of job insecurity research also has an important scientific value, as results from e.g., Eastern Europe offer important insights into the generalization of job insecurity findings and theories. This broadens the theoretical explanations of job insecurity and its consequences, and offers the possibility to potentially develop new views and complementary practical interventions. Such an exchange will without any doubt enrich science in this field.

### **Overview of the content of this issue**

In this special issue, eight studies are reported, covering a variety of countries like Romania, Lithuania and Croatia from Eastern Europe and Turkey, Syria and China situated between Europe and the Far East. All studies are cross-sectional in nature, and use a variety of statistical methods, from e.g., regression analysis to structural equation modelling. A large variety of possible outcomes of job insecurity are analysed, from health and well-being over typical organizational attitudes like job satisfaction and organizational commitment, to several operationalisations of performance. Special attention has been given to a more diverse operationalization of job insecurity, by including both its quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and to the use of theory in developing the hypotheses tested. Many contributions focus on moderators or mediators of the job insecurity – outcomes relationship, thus answering the call of previous scholars in the field to analyse more complex relationships (e.g., De Witte, 2005; Klendermans & Van Vuuren, 1999; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002), in order to clarify explanations of the detrimental consequences of job insecurity (mediators) or variables that allow to mitigate the negative consequences of job insecurity (moderators).

This special issue opens with the article of Fischmann, Sulea, Kovacs, Iliescu and De Witte on the association of qualitative and quantitative job insecurity with a set of job performance aspects. They use data from Romania, and focus on the direct association

between job insecurity and performance, without adding moderators or mediators to their analysis. Their contribution concerns the differentiation of both aspects of job insecurity and of various dimensions of performance, by distinguishing proficiency, adaptivity and proactivity at three levels: the individual task, team, and organization. Their findings corroborate the hypothesis of a negative association between job insecurity and performance, but at the same time also show that these associations depend upon the operationalization of the performance construct, as not all associations remain significant when analysed simultaneously.

We continue with three studies on moderators. The study of Roll, Siu and Li is a logical successor of the study of Fischmann et al., as they analyse the job insecurity – performance relationship by adding a test of the possible buffering effect of 'uncertainty avoidance', defined as the extent to which individuals try to avoid ambiguity about the future. The latter is measured as an individual level variable, in contrast to cross-national comparative studies in which such variables are framed as aspects of the country's culture, and used to explain differences between countries. Roll et al. also analyse both quantitative and qualitative job insecurity and test their hypotheses in two national contexts: China and Germany. By adding Germany in their study, they extend the focus of the special issue by including a Western European country. This comparison however strengthens their test and leads to the intriguing finding that the expected relationships can only be found in Germany, but not in China. The association between job insecurity and performance, and the moderation of this relationship by uncertainty avoidance, thus seems dependent on the specific context in which the test is performed.

Çakmak-Otluoğlu and Ünsal-Akbıyık use data from Turkey to examine the association between quantitative job insecurity and two aspects of organizational commitment: the affective dimension that has received most research attention in the past, and the normative dimension, which has not received much research attention. Next to these direct associations, they also introduce and test a new moderator: the perception of

organizational career development opportunities as possible buffer of the job insecurity – commitment association, due to the fulfilment of the psychological contract when one perceives such opportunities. In doing so, they do not focus on an individual level variable, but rather on a variable at the organizational level. Their findings however do not support the hypothesis of a buffer effect, and also the expected association between insecurity and normative commitment cannot be confirmed in their study.

The last paper on moderation shifts the focus to another aspect of the organizational context as moderator. Tomas and Maslić Seršić analyse the association between quantitative job insecurity and various aspects of self-rated health (e.g., physical, general and mental health). They use data from Croatia and focus on a group of workers that has too often been neglected: industrial shift workers. The authors analyse the incremental contribution of job insecurity in predicting employees' health and well-being, as well as the moderating effects of various job characteristics on these relationships. To select a relevant set of job characteristics, they introduce the concept of psychological climate. They further draw on the Conservation of Resources Theory to develop hypotheses on both buffering (job demands) and boosting (job resources) effects. Some of these moderation hypotheses are corroborated. Their test however also reveals some unexpected findings: job control boosted rather than buffered the negative relationship between job insecurity and e.g., general health.

In deepening our knowledge on job insecurity, one not only needs to understand whether the job insecurity-outcomes relationship can be mitigated, but above all, one also needs to examine theoretical explanations for the detrimental consequences of job insecurity. This meets the often raised concern that job insecurity research needs to further integrate and test theory, as much research in the past has been rather a-theoretical in nature (De Witte et al., 2015b; Klandermans & Van Vuuren, 1999). Testing theory relates to testing mediators. Longitudinal research designs are of course

preferable in order to test such causal links. The use of cross-sectional designs can, however, already enable an interesting exploration of these ideas. Three articles in this special issue focus explicitly on testing mediation.

Vîrgă uses Romanian data to test whether the association between both quantitative and qualitative job insecurity and job satisfaction are mediated by psychological capital. This personal resource refers to the psychological capacities efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. She develops her hypotheses based on the Job Demands Resources model and on Conservation of Resources Theory. Her hypotheses are corroborated, which adds another possible explanation to the literature of the detrimental consequences of job insecurity: insecurity is negatively associated with the depletion of a person's inner resources, which in turn relates negatively to job satisfaction.

Urbanaviciute, Lazauskaite-Zabielske, Vander Elst, Bagdziuniene and De Witte are next in testing the mediating role of control perceptions in the relationship between qualitative job insecurity on the one hand, and job satisfaction and organizational commitment on the other. They use a large sample of employees in the public and private sector in Lithuania to test their hypotheses. Two work related control perceptions are analysed: perceived organizational control and external perceived employability. Their findings suggest both control perceptions to mediate the associations between job insecurity and commitment, with one exception: perceived employability only mediated the association with organizational commitment. Urbanaviciute et al. thus add to the growing evidence of control perceptions as 'explanation' of the job insecurity - outcomes relationship (e.g., Vander Elst, Van den Broeck, De Cuyper & De Witte, 2014). At the same time they also illustrate the ambiguous role of (external) perceived employability, as they also found a small positive indirect relationship between job insecurity and commitment via employability, next to the expected negative direct association between job insecurity and commitment.

Oprea and Iliescu focus on yet another possible mediator: job crafting, defined as the

proactive change of job characteristics by the employees. In doing so, they distinguish four kinds of job crafting, like increasing (structural versus social) job resources or decreasing hindering job demands. Using a cross-sectional sample, they additionally explore the bidirectional relationship between quantitative job insecurity and burnout: does job insecurity affect burnout, or is it the other way around? They test their hypotheses derived from the Job Demands Resources model and Conservation of Resources Theory on data of ICT-workers in Romania. Their results suggest that it is burnout that affects job insecurity, rather than the opposite, and that this relationship is (only) mediated by increasing job demands. They find that burnout is negatively associated with increasing challenging job demands, whereas increasing challenging job demands are positively associated with job insecurity. Stated otherwise: burnout 'leads' to a reduction in challenging demands, which in turn 'reduces' job insecurity, in their study. As the data are cross-sectional, caution is still warranted in interpreting or generalising these conclusions.

The final contribution of Mahmoud and Reisel brings us 'back to the beginning'. These scholars collected data in Damascus, the capital of Syria, and examine a new possible antecedent of job insecurity perceptions: the personal experience of wartime crisis. In this last study of this special issue, job insecurity thus suddenly becomes the dependent rather than the independent variable. Additionally, however, these authors also examine the associations of quantitative job insecurity with a wide variety of organizational outcomes, including trust, intention to quit and OCBs. They finally also combine both research aims, by testing the mediation between the personal experience of wartime crisis and the various outcomes via job insecurity. Most hypotheses are confirmed, which adds the personal experience of wartime crisis to the growing list of antecedents of (quantitative) job insecurity. Their study additionally suggests that the impact of a war on organizational attitudes can (at least partially) be explained by the increase of job insecurity because of that war.

## **What have we learned?**

### **Outcomes of job insecurity**

The results of the various studies in this special issue first of all confirm the findings in the literature that job insecurity is associated with negative individual and organizational consequences (e.g., De Witte et al., 2015a; Ferrie, 2001; Probst, 2008; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Several studies focused on job satisfaction and (affective) organizational commitment, and found a negative association, as expected (see e.g., Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). This suggests that the detrimental consequences of job insecurity are not typical for Western Europe, Canada or the US, but can be generalized to a variety of national contexts, including Turkey, Syria, Lithuania and Romania. Further evidence was found for negative associations with physical, general and mental health (Croatia), burnout (Romania), and intentions to quit (Syria). The study of Tomas and Maslić Seršić even shows job insecurity to represent one of the most important work stressors among industrial shift workers (and for physical health even the most important one).

Special attention was devoted to performance indicators. Here too, most findings are in agreement with the literature in the field (Cheng & Chan, 2008), showing that job insecurity associates negatively with OCB (Syria) and performance (Germany). However, the association between job insecurity and performance depended on the kind of performance in the study of Fischmann et al., showing stronger associations with in-role behaviours ('proficiency') than with aspects that related to adaptivity - whereas proactivity was not affected. This suggests in-role behaviours to be more dependent on job insecurity than extra-role behaviours, a finding that needs further clarification and verification in future research. Note that no associations with performance were found in China, suggesting its association with job insecurity to be dependent on the specific economic, historical and economic context of the country. This is of course an intriguing finding that warrants more research in the future, as it suggests that specific structural and cultural country characteristics such as e.g., values, levels of unemployment and

labour market legislation can mitigate the effect of job insecurity on outcomes, and especially performance.

A similar comment can be made regarding some other striking non-significant findings. The absence of a significant association between job insecurity and trust in Syria was surprising and remains unexplained, especially in the light of the strong meta-correlations with trust reported in the previous meta-analyses (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). The absence of an association between normative commitment and job insecurity was an interesting finding too, as this variable has not often been added to job insecurity research before. It therefore remains unclear whether this finding is a ‘one off’, or whether it shows that this outcome is not related to job insecurity. Replication studies might clarify this issue.

## Two kinds of job insecurity

The various studies in this special issue did not only focus on quantitative job insecurity. Several did also analyse its qualitative counterpart. Most studies (seven out of eight) focused on quantitative job insecurity, much in line with the general literature. However, no less than half of the studies (four out of eight) focused on qualitative job insecurity, an aspect less well understood to date. The studies in this special issue showed that both kinds of job insecurity are associated with negative outcomes, much in line with previous research (e.g., De Witte, De Cuyper, Handaja, Sverke, Näswall & Hellgren, 2010; Hellgren, Sverke & Isaksson, 1999). Three papers even included both kinds of insecurity, which allow to compare the magnitude of the associations. In their seminal article, Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) suggested quantitative job insecurity to be more problematic than qualitative insecurity, as losing the entire job was assumed to be worse than losing relevant and valued aspects of the job. Roll et al. on the contrary found rather similar associations between both job insecurity measurements and performance in Germany and China, and also Virgã observed no striking difference in associations for job satisfaction in Romania. Fischmann et al. however showed qualitative job insecurity to associate with more aspects

of performance than its quantitative counterpart. These results seem to contradict Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt’s assumption, by showing that qualitative job insecurity is as bad as or even worse than quantitative insecurity. These findings could be due to specific features of the sample, measurements or context (nation and its characteristics) and require further exploration in future research.

## Theory used

In a recent overview article of longitudinal studies, the use of theory in the field of job insecurity research has been summarized (De Witte et al., 2015b). That review first of all showed that theory was often not used at all. An interesting feature of this special issue is that all studies explicitly used theory in developing their hypotheses. Next, the review article showed that when used, theories related to Jahoda’s (1982) latent deprivation theory, general stress theories (such as Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), work stress theories (like Karasek’s (1979) Job Demand Control Model), and social exchange theories, like psychological contract breach. Almost all theories have been used in this special issue, with a predominance of psychological contract breach (and social exchange), appraisal theory, conservation of resources theory and the more recent Job Demands Resources model instead of Karasek’s JDC-model. Striking is perhaps the absence of Jahoda’s latent deprivation model. However, also some additions have been made: Tomas and Maslić Seršić added the psychological climate framework to the list, and Fischmann et al. also used threat rigidity theory to develop their hypotheses. One can only hope that theory will be further integrated in future job insecurity research.

## Samples drawn

Psychologists are not always that concerned with the sample used, and often use ‘convenience samples’. The characteristics of the participants in a survey can however influence the findings, as many psychological variables in the field of Occupational Health Psychology are associated with

demographical variables such as gender, age – and above all – educational level and occupational position (Becker, 2005). Most studies reported in this special issue stem from white-collar workers, sometimes even working in a specific sector or industry (like ICT in the article of Oprea and Iliescu). The findings of these studies need to be replicated with samples of blue-collar workers, before one can generalize their conclusions. The study of Tomas and Maslić Seršić is a welcome contribution to the field, as they focussed on blue-collar industrial shift workers, a vulnerable and understudied occupational group. The fact that blue-collar workers are understudied in job insecurity research is all the more surprising, since blue collar-workers are more exposed to job insecurity (Erlinghagen 2008), whereas the meta-analysis of Sverke et al. (2002) also shows that job insecurity affects them in an even more negative way. Future research needs to redress this imbalance.

### **Moderators**

Three articles focussed on moderators of the job insecurity – outcomes relationship. Roll et al. did find an effect of individual level uncertainty avoidance. Çakmak-Otluoğlu and Ünsal-Akbıyık, however, could not find evidence for their hypothesis that organizational career development opportunities buffer the association between job insecurity and organizational commitment. Tomas and Maslić Seršić analysed the buffering role of several job characteristics in the relationship between job insecurity and several health and well-being variables. They found partial support for their hypotheses: role clarity buffered some relationships as expected, and also some job demands showed the expected boosting effect of some relationships. Some findings were, however, opposite to expectations: job control boosted rather than buffered the negative association between job insecurity and general health. Taken together, this suggests that there is some – albeit rather modest - evidence for moderation. This seems in keeping with the findings in the field of job insecurity research, that sometimes appears contradictory and diffuse (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Studies in

the field would probably benefit from a more encompassing classification of moderators, to allow building a more coherent set of knowledge regarding their effects.

### **Mediators**

Three articles in this special issue focussed on testing mediation, thus offering insights into the possible explanations of the consequences of job insecurity. Virgă analysed – and found evidence for – the mediating role of the personal resource psychological capital, an individual level variable derived from positive psychology (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004). Urbanaviciute et al. found evidence for the mediating role of control perceptions, like perceived organizational control and external perceived employability, in the relationship between (qualitative) job insecurity and outcomes. Oprea and Iliescu reverse the link between job insecurity and burnout by suggesting that burnout leads to specific job crafting behaviours, which in turn affect job insecurity. All reported findings were based on cross-sectional samples, and need to be replicated in longitudinal research before definite conclusions can be drawn. The findings additionally also suggest that the field would benefit from an integration of possible mediating mechanisms, and from competitive tests in which several explanations are contrasted with each other (see e.g., De Witte et al., 2015b).

### **Final conclusion**

This collection of articles is of course only a modest step forward in enlarging the job insecurity field – and as always, ‘more research is still needed’. One can only hope that this issue will inspire scholars from Eastern Europe and the Far East (as well as Latin America and Africa) to add their research to the job insecurity literature. A specific topic that seems relevant in that regard is the explicit comparison of countries around the world regarding the level, antecedents and consequences of job insecurity. Such cross-national comparisons will allow to test whether we can generalise our actual knowledge in the field, and seems like an important topic for future research.

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