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Explaining the job insecurity-safety link in the public transportation industry: The mediating role of safety-production conflict

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has established a link between job insecurity and a myriad of safety outcomes; yet, the explanatory mechanism for this link is unexplored. The purpose of the current study was to explore the role of safety-production conflict (SPC) as a mediator between the relationship of job insecurity and six workplace safety outcomes: behavioral safety compliance, poor accident reporting attitudes, workplace injuries, experienced safety events, unreported safety events, and accident underreporting. Our hypotheses were tested using data from a sample of 389 public transit employees in the United States. Using a bootstrap sampling technique, mediation analyses revealed significant direct and indirect effects (mediation through SPC) of job insecurity on aforementioned workplace safety outcomes. Specifically, higher levels of job insecurity were associated with higher levels of SPC, which, in turn, were associated with detrimental workplace safety outcomes. In the context of improving employee safety, these results suggest that efforts to manage employee perceptions regarding safety-production tradeoffs are of particular importance in light of today's pervasive job insecurity during times of global financial crises.

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1. Introduction

The International Labor Organization estimates that 317 million work-related accidents occur around the globe annually ([International Labor Organization, 2015](#)). This equates to 870,000 workers injured every day on the job. In the United States alone, an estimated three million workers experience work-related injuries and illness annually ([United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014](#)). Given the staggering number of workplace accidents and injuries, identifying leading indicators of employee safety-related outcomes is vital. While current safety research is understandably focused on traditional safety-related predictors (e.g. safety knowledge, safety motivation) of safety outcomes, research is needed to better understand how and why other variables might also impact safety-related outcomes, especially in times of global financial crises. With the rapidly changing nature of work and the ongoing aftermath of the global economic downturn, one such individual factor requiring closer scrutiny is job insecurity, i.e., concern about

the continued existence of one's job ([Van Vuuren and Klandermands, 1990](#)).

Since the start of the most recent global recession in 2008, the world has witnessed the largest destruction of wealth (in the trillions of dollars) in recorded history ([YaleGlobal, 2016](#)). By the end of 2009, more than 27 million individuals worldwide had been laid off and an unprecedented 87% of the countries tracked by the International Monetary Fund were declining in their financial stability ([International Labor Organization, 2011](#)). Similarly, increases in global job insecurity levels have been observed ([International Labor Organization, 2011](#)). Not surprisingly, the American Psychological Association Stress in America™ survey ([American Psychological Association, 2015](#)) found that Americans rate work, money, and the economy as their top three sources of stress, attesting to the importance of work and income on individuals' well-being.

With this in mind, emerging research has focused on the impact of economic factors, productivity, and human factors on occupational health and safety. For example, [Fabiano et al. \(2010\)](#) conducted a study examining the impacts of economic factors, technologies, job design, organization of work conditions, and human factors on occupational accident frequency. Further, a study conducted by [Anyfantis et al. \(2016\)](#) presented a model that defined occupational safety and health as well as established its

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role in the socio-economic environment. This study also suggests that the financial crisis has impacted most economic sectors in a way that puts occupational health and safety at risk (Anyfantis et al., 2016). Lastly, recent research has identified psychosocial health and job insecurity as specific risk factors associated with occupational health and safety (Anyfantis et al., 2016). In light of this, exploring why economic factors, such as job insecurity, are associated with negative safety-related outcomes is of particular importance.

Although a growing body of research has demonstrated the negative impact of job insecurity on a wide variety of employee safety outcomes (e.g., safety motivation, compliance, injuries, and accident reporting; Huang et al., 2012; Jiang and Probst, 2014; Probst, 2003; Probst and Brubaker, 2001; Quinlan, 2005; Størseth, 2006), the literature has yet to identify the mechanisms explaining the relationship between job insecurity and negative safety-related outcomes. As noted by Hayes (2012), in order for a research area to mature there needs to be a shift from merely focusing on establishing a relationship between two constructs to clarifying the mechanisms through which the relationship operates. Therefore, by testing the explanatory power of safety-production conflict on the relationship between job insecurity and safety-related outcomes, this study contributes to our understanding of why job insecurity predicts negative safety-related outcomes.

In this study, we examined whether *safety-production conflict* (SPC), defined as the perceived conflict between working safely while also meeting production demands, explains the relationships between job insecurity and safety-related outcomes. Job insecurity is proposed to contribute to employee perceived conflict between safety and production, which, in turn, predicts negative safety-related outcomes. In addition to testing the posited mediating role of SPC, we examined multiple safety outcomes (i.e. behavioral safety compliance, poor accident reporting attitudes, workplace injuries, experienced safety events, unreported safety events, and accident underreporting) in order to enhance the conceptual replication (Schmidt, 2009) of our hypotheses.

2. A model addressing safety-production conflict as a mediator of the job insecurity-workplace safety relationships

2.1. Development of the theoretical model

Conservation of Resources theory (COR, Hobfoll, 1989) provides a theoretical explanation for the relationships among job insecurity, SPC, and negative employee safety outcomes. COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) argues that people strive to retain resources. Stable employment is a valuable resource because individuals may value their job for its own purpose (Jahoda, 1981) and for its ability to facilitate the attainment of other valuable resources (e.g. housing, food, clothing, income). When faced with the potential loss of highly valued resources (i.e. jobs), people strive to minimize net loss of their resources (Hobfoll, 1989).

During periods of job insecurity, one strives to maintain valuable resources by focusing on production as opposed to safety, leading to more accidents and injuries. In fact, Probst and Brubaker (2007) have demonstrated that employees persistently believe that layoff decisions will be made based solely on productivity rather than safety. This belief may be particularly strong when employees feel their job is threatened. As a result, employees who perceive that their jobs are at risk might compromise safety in an attempt to increase production and keep their jobs, which leads to decreased safety behaviors and increased workplace accidents and injuries. Fig. 1 describes our proposed model linking job insecurity and workplace safety, SPC and workplace safety, and posit-

ing the mediating role of SPC on the relationship between job insecurity and workplace safety.

2.2. Job insecurity and worker safety

A growing body of empirical research supports a link between individual perceptions of job insecurity and safety outcomes. A large-scale, multi-national review by Quinlan (2005) offered initial evidence that precarious work was predictive of safety outcomes (e.g. safety compliance, injury rates, and safety knowledge). Subsequent studies have examined occupational health and safety risks in temporary workers, a workforce which is constantly at risk for job loss and re-assignment (Fabiano et al., 2008; Saloniemi and Salminen, 2010; Seo et al., 2015). In the first study to directly test this link, Probst and Brubaker (2001) demonstrated that job insecurity perceptions were longitudinally associated with low compliance with safety policies and reduced safety motivation. Additionally, low compliance and safety motivation were related to more workplace injuries and accidents. In a follow-up experimental study manipulating the threat of job layoffs (Probst, 2002), individuals threatened with layoffs were shown to engage in more subsequent violations of workplace safety policies, while simultaneously increasing their production output. More recently, a study conducted by Jiang and Probst (2014) with 639 employees from multiple companies demonstrated that job insecurity is associated with negative safety outcomes. Given these findings, we predict that:

Hypothesis 1. Employee job insecurity is negatively related to behavioral safety compliance (H1a), and positively related to poor accident reporting attitudes (H1b), workplace injuries (H1c), the number of experienced safety events (H1d), the number of unreported safety events (H1e), and accident under-reporting (H1f).

2.3. Safety-Production conflict and workplace safety

SPC, sometimes labeled as work-safety tension (McGonagle and Kath, 2010), safety vs. production, work pressure, production pressure, or production conflict, is defined by McLain and Jarrell (2007) as “the perceived inability to achieve joint safety and production goals” (p. 299). SPC exists when the demands and means necessary to meet production goals are perceived directly at odds with worker safety practices. COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that when experiencing SPC, employees have to choose where to allocate resources to optimize resource gain and prevent resources loss. When a task requires split focus to perform effectively and safely, employees are forced to either complete tasks quickly or adhere to safety practices while completing the tasks more slowly. Thus, employees may put effort into meeting production demands over safety demands in an attempt to gain resources.

Theoretical support can also be derived from the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein, 1979; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), which provides a more volitional explanation for the relationship between SPC and safety-related outcomes. The Theory of Reasoned Action (along with subsequent theoretical enhancements such as Behavioral Reasoning Theory; Westaby, 2005) suggests that employee behaviors can be predicted by their perceived control over the behavior, the perceived social norms regarding the behavior, as well as their reasons for and against engaging in the behavior. Therefore, employees who perceive a conflict between safety and production may decide to focus their efforts and energies in areas more salient to and valued by the organization (i.e. reasons for and against engaging in certain behaviors). Regardless of their personal value for safety, employees may engage in poor safety

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