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## Moderating effects of contingent work on the relationship between job insecurity and employee safety

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### ABSTRACT

The recent global financial crisis has resulted in heightened levels of employee job insecurity, as well as an increased reliance on a contingent workforce. The purpose of the current study was to examine the conjoint effects of these factors on employee safety-related outcomes. Using survey data from a sample of 1228 employees from a variety of different private and public organizations in Italy, we tested theoretically-derived competing vulnerability and immunity hypotheses regarding the interaction between contingent work and job insecurity. Our results generally supported the vulnerability hypothesis, suggesting that contingent work coupled with job insecurity significantly increase employee risk for poor safety-related outcomes. Specifically, under conditions of job insecurity, contingent workers displayed more adverse safety-related outcomes (e.g., worse safety compliance, safety knowledge, and safety participation) compared to permanent workers. However, the accuracy of their accident reporting was increased under conditions of job insecurity, compared to permanent employees. We discuss these findings in light of important concerns about the safety of contingent workers in the wake of the most recent economic and financial crisis.

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### 1. Introduction

In the European Union (EU), nearly 2.5 million work-related accidents occur annually with a loss of more than 10 million work days as a result of such accidents and work-related health problems (Eurostat, 2016a). It is estimated that every four-and-a-half seconds an EU worker is involved in an accident which forces them to stay home for at least three working days (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2008). With these sobering statistics as a backdrop, the current research sought to identify the contributing role of the current financial crisis, the concomitant rise of the contingent workforce, and the increasingly prevalent stressor of job insecurity toward predicting employee safety attitudes, behaviors, and accidents.

Job insecurity has been defined as a perceived threat to the continuity of one's employment (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984; Probst, 2003; Sverke and Hellgren, 2002) and is most commonly conceptualized as a subjective stressor that is "in the eyes of the beholder" rather than an objective property of the employment contract per se. On the other hand, although there are numerous terms for contingent work (e.g., alternative work arrangements,

precarious employment, temporary work) and contingent workers (e.g., temporary employees, seasonal employees, leased workers, fixed-term employees), the essential distinguishing characteristic is whether there is an explicit or implicit contract for a long-term employment relationship (Polivka and Nardone, 1989; Polivka, 1996). Thus, it is the transitory nature of the employment contract that identifies a contingent worker.

Within Italy – the geographical location of the current study – contingent work has been on the rise since the mid-1990s. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012), the percentage of contingent workers in Italy has nearly doubled from 7.2% in 1995 to 13.4% in 2011. This trend is particularly apparent among younger workers, where the rate has sharply increased during that same time period from 17.9% to 49.9%, which suggests a dramatically changing nature of the "typical" employment contract for new workforce entrants.

While there is a growing body of evidence linking job insecurity to poor safety-related outcomes (Probst and Brubaker, 2001; Probst, 2002, 2004; Probst et al., 2013), no research to date has examined whether these effects might differ as a function of the employment status of the worker, i.e., whether they hold a contingent versus a permanent position. Research indicates that contingent workers have fatal and non-fatal occupational injury

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rates that are more than twice as large as permanent workers (Benavides et al., 2006). Given that contingent workers are already a vulnerable sector of the workforce by virtue of their precarious status within an organization, one might predict that the stressor of job insecurity would be even more salient and detrimental compared to employees who enjoy a permanent contract (i.e., a *vulnerability hypothesis*). On the other hand, it could also be argued that job insecurity is a less stressful experience for contingent workers (i.e., an *immunity hypothesis*), precisely because their psychological contract expectations are more closely aligned with their legal employment contract. In other words, because temporary workers have fewer expectations for secure work compared to permanent workers, the experience of job insecurity may be less adverse because there is less of a psychological contract violation (De Witte and Näswall, 2003; De Cuyper and De Witte, 2005).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to develop and test these competing hypotheses regarding the relationship between contingent work, job insecurity, and employee safety-related outcomes. We begin by discussing the extant literature on the relationship between job insecurity and workplace safety. We then document the rise of the contingent workforce in Italy, and how this can be linked to the current financial crisis. Next, we review the empirical evidence showing that contingent workers are at risk of poor safety-related outcomes. Finally, we discuss how the effects of job insecurity on safety-related outcomes may be compounded or attenuated as a function of contingent worker status.

### 1.1. The effects of job insecurity on employee safety

Over two decades of research have demonstrated that job insecurity is directly and indirectly related to a multitude of consequences that negatively impact employees and organizations. Two recent meta-analyses of this body of research (Cheng and Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002) suggest that the perception of job insecurity generates cognitive, affective, and attitudinal reactions which result in diminished employee well-being ranging from decreased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in management, and job involvement to more negative mental health outcomes and turnover intentions.

More recently, research has begun to focus on the safety-related implications of employee job insecurity, the results of which suggest that job insecurity may have detrimental effects on employee safety attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes (Grunberg et al., 1996; Probst, 2002; Probst and Brubaker, 2001). One of the first field studies (Probst and Brubaker, 2001) to specifically examine the relationship between job insecurity and safety found that as job insecurity increased, employee safety knowledge and motivation to comply with safety policies and procedures decreased. As a result, reported safety compliance was adversely affected. Not surprisingly, employees with insecure jobs suffered more accidents and injuries compared to employees with relatively more secure jobs. Later experimental research (Probst, 2002) found corroborative evidence indicating that individuals threatened with layoffs violated more safety policies than their secure counterparts. Subsequent research by Størseth (2006) found that job insecurity was related to increased risk taking behaviors at work. Finally, Probst et al. (2013) found that not only was job insecurity related to more workplace accidents, but it was also related to a greater propensity to underreport such accidents.

While there are likely multiple reasons for the observed relationships between job insecurity and poor safety outcomes, Quinlan and Bohle (2009) argue it may be partially due to organizational-level factors such as work intensification, understaffing, and constraints on occupational health and safety train-

ing. Other research points to individual factors related to employee reactions to job stress. Probst and Brubaker (2001) proposed that employees may compromise safety in times of job insecurity due to devoting more time and energy resources toward behaviors that may be seen as more salient to their employer (e.g., meeting production demands). While that perspective suggests a conscious de-emphasis on safety, another possibility is that safety is compromised due to a finite set of cognitive resources (Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989). The added stress of job insecurity might lead to more cognitive resources being devoted to off-task (e.g., conversing with coworkers) and self-regulatory (e.g., monitoring of one's job security) activities rather than on-task safety related activities. Indeed, Dunbar (1993) found that anxiety was related to reductions in employee use of personal protective equipment.

Based on this evidence, we expected to replicate prior research and find that:

**Hypothesis 1.** Job insecurity will be related to more negative safety-related outcomes (i.e., decreased safety knowledge, motivation, compliance and participation; increased accidents and underreporting).

### 1.2. The rise of the contingent workforce

Over the past several decades, fixed-term contracts and reliance on a contingent workforce have increased among new hires in all 27 European Union countries (with the exception of Sweden and Finland) with contingent workers representing nearly 15% of the European workforce in 2007 (Schaufeli, 2016). In 1985, less than 5% of Italian workers (the focus of the current study) held temporary positions. However, during the late nineties, Italy introduced changes in employment protection laws that eased regulations surrounding temporary work. The aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis saw a continued rise in reliance on contingent workers, and by 2014, 13.6% of all Italian employees held temporary positions (Eurostat, 2016b).

Strikingly (but perhaps not surprisingly), this trend has affected young workers and new workforce entrants to a greater extent. The percentage of young workers in temporary jobs increased from 9% in 1985 to 44% in 2009; for adult workers, those figures increased from 4% to 11% (Working Lives Research Institute, 2012). Indeed, a recent analysis by Lilla and Staffolani (2012) found that approximately three-quarters of all jobs held by young workers in Italy now begin as temporary contracts. Moreover, less than 7% of such temporary positions convert to permanent positions within the organization (Lilla and Staffolani, 2012), suggesting that these temporary positions do not represent a new mode of entry toward gaining a permanent position, but rather a substantially different reality for new workforce entrants.

### 1.3. Contingent workers and safety outcomes

The increasing reliance on contingent workers is compounded by a growing concern among the international community that such workers may be at higher risk of experiencing workplace injury (Cummings and Kreiss, 2008) and adverse health-related outcomes (Kawachi, 2008). In Italy (as well as the European Union more broadly; Council of European Communities, 1991), workplace safety regulations and policies are equally applicable to both permanent and contingent workers (Consolidated Law on Safety at Work Legislative Decrees no. 81/2008 and no. 106/2009). Therefore, employers are expected to protect the health and safety of employees, regardless of whether they are permanent or contingent (Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, 2015). Despite this

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