



Leader–member exchange: Moderating the health and safety outcomes of job insecurity

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Job insecurity has been repeatedly linked with poor employee health and safety outcomes. Although research on high quality leader–member exchange (LMX) has demonstrated many beneficial effects, no research to date has examined the extent to which positive LMX might attenuate those adverse health and safety-related consequences of job insecurity. The current study extends research in this area by specifically examining the buffering impact of LMX on the relationship between job insecurity and safety knowledge, reported accidents, and physical health conditions. Furthermore, the study also examines whether positive LMX mitigates the typically seen negative impact of job insecurity on supervisor satisfaction. **Methods:** The hypotheses were tested using survey data collected from 212 employees of a mine located in southwestern United States. **Results:** As predicted, job insecurity was related to lower levels of supervisor satisfaction, more health ailments, and more workplace accidents, and was marginally related to lower levels of safety knowledge. Results indicated that LMX significantly attenuated these observed relationships. **Conclusions:** The quality of the dyadic relationship between supervisor and subordinate has a significant impact on the extent to which job insecurity is associated with adverse health and safety outcomes. **Practical applications:** Practical implications for supervisor behavior and developing high quality LMX are discussed in light of today's pervasive job insecurity.

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1. Introduction

Nearly three million work-related injuries and illnesses are reported by private industry organizations annually in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Although there are numerous causes for these workplace accidents, a growing body of research suggests that job insecurity is causally related to lower levels of safety knowledge, safety compliance, and higher rates of accidents and injuries (Probst, 2002, 2004; Probst & Brubaker, 2001). Not surprisingly, research also suggests that supervisors play an important role in influencing the safety-related behaviors of their employees (Barling, Loughlin, & Kelloway, 2002; Probst & Estrada, 2010; Zohar, 2002).

In particular, having a quality leader–member exchange (LMX) marked by trust, respect, and mutual obligation between an employee and his/her supervisor (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), has proven to be a very valuable predictor when studying hypothesized linkages between leadership processes and outcomes (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Although limited, some research has examined the relationship between leader–member exchange and safety performance, finding that higher quality LMX is associated with more positive safety communication, stronger commitment to safety, and fewer accidents (Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999); more positive safety citizenship role definitions (Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerras, 2003); and fewer self-reported safety-related events (Michael, Guo, Wiedenbeck, & Ray, 2006).

While it is clear that LMX is related to a host of positive safety outcomes, no research to date has examined the boundary conditions of these positive LMX effects with respect to job insecurity. Specifically, do the positive effects of LMX on employee safety remain consistent even under conditions of job insecurity (which presumably puts strain on the supervisor–employee relationship)? While there has been no research answering this specific question, three recent studies examined whether LMX attenuates the negative relationship between job insecurity and affective commitment (Hu & Zuo, 2007), altruism (Loi, Ngo, Zhang, & Lau, 2011), and organizational commitment and somatic complaints (Cheng, Huang, Lee, & Ren, 2012). Our study, therefore, builds upon this nascent line of research to examine the potentially buffering effects of LMX on health and safety-related consequences of job insecurity. In doing so, we contribute to the extant literature in multiple ways.

First, we extend the limited research on LMX as a moderator of job insecurity's consequences by examining lesser-studied outcomes related to employee safety and health, specifically employee safety knowledge, number of workplace accidents, and employee physical health. Investigating the effects of LMX on these outcomes of job insecurity has high practical value. While organizations may not realistically be able to provide guarantees of job security, they can invest in the professional development of supervisors to assist in the creation of high quality LMX relationships, and in turn, potentially prevent some of the costly health and safety consequences of job insecurity.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, we integrate conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) with theories of LMX to develop specific hypotheses regarding the relationships between job insecurity, LMX, and our health and safety outcomes of interest. COR theory posits that the fundamental motivation of individuals is to gain resources and guard against resource loss. We argue that because LMX consists of mutual respect, high levels of trust, and expectations of professional obligation (Dansereau, Cashman, & Graen, 1973), employees may view such an enriched relationship as a valuable resource that might serve as an instrument to gain other valued resources (e.g., health and safety) and ameliorate the effects of stress and uncertainty that accompanies job insecurity. Therefore, we not only enrich COR theory by demonstrating the advantages of gaining a valued resource of high LMX, but also inform potential intervention strategies regarding utilizing resources available in one's environment (i.e., improving the leader-member relationships) during times of job insecurity in efforts to enhance other resources such as employee safety and health at work.

Third, we utilize a methodologically rigorous approach to test our research hypotheses by examining a unique conceptualization of job insecurity as well as multiple operationalizations of LMX. Specifically, rather than focusing on simply the perceived stability and continuance of one's job (i.e., cognitive job insecurity), our study examines employee affective reactions to perceived job insecurity (i.e., affective job security; Probst, 2003). Increasingly advocated (Jiang & Probst, 2014), such an approach allows us to detangle the effects of employee's cognitive assessment that their job is insecure from the effects of experiencing a negative emotional reaction to such perceived insecurity (e.g., fear, worry, anxiety). Although research suggests the latter might be more closely associated with job-related outcomes (Probst, 2003), previous research on the relationship between insecurity and LMX (Cheng et al., 2012; Hu & Zuo, 2007; Loi et al., 2011) has focused mainly on cognitive job insecurity rather than affective job insecurity. As an extension of previous research, therefore, we conceptualize job insecurity as an affective variable, and operationalize it using a measure of job security satisfaction (Probst, 2003).

With respect to LMX, the contribution of our study lies in our utilization of both LMX of social exchange (i.e., LMSX; Bernerth, Armenakis, Feild, Giles, & Walker, 2007) and a multidimensional measure of LMX (LMX-MDM; Liden & Maslyn, 1998), as such differentiation allows us to illustrate the complexity of leader-member interactions and to obtain a more accurate understanding of the moderating effects of LMX on the consequences of job insecurity.

In the sections below, COR theory is utilized to predict the negative outcomes of job insecurity, followed by empirical findings related to our outcome variables of supervisor satisfaction, safety knowledge, workplace accidents, and employee physical health. Next, we conceptualize high LMX as a valued resource under the framework of COR theory, and delineate the positive safety outcomes resulting from a high quality LMX relationship. Last, we develop hypotheses regarding the buffering effects of high LMX on the negative consequences of job insecurity.

2. Negative consequences of job insecurity

To obtain insight into the effect of job insecurity on employees' safety outcomes, we rely on Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory, which proposes that individuals are motivated to retain, protect, and build resources, and therefore perceive the potential or actual loss of valued resources as threats. Negative consequences occur when individuals lose resources, perceive that resources are threatened with loss, and/or fail to gain resources after resource investment. As stated in COR theory, resources are valued in their own right or serve as an instrument to obtain other valued resources. Furthermore, resources can be classified as objects (e.g., housing, clothing, food), personal characteristics

(e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy), conditions (e.g., marriage, seniority, tenure), or energies (e.g., time, money, or knowledge).

Based on COR theory, stable employment is viewed as a condition resource for at least two reasons. First, stable employment brings job incumbents both manifest and latent benefits (Jahoda, 1981). In addition to serving as a financial resource, stable employment puts a time structure on employees, defines their social status and identity, connects them with social goals and purposes, brings them with social contacts, and enforces their regular activities (Jahoda, 1981). Similarly, Warr (1987) argues that job security is an environmental feature exerting a constant influence on individuals' happiness. Secondly, job security can facilitate individuals to achieve other valued resources (e.g., housing, food, clothing, respect, self-efficacy). Therefore, affective job insecurity (i.e., the worry associated with retaining one's job) can be perceived as a threat to employees' valued resources, including employment, income, respect, and social status, among others (Hellgren, Sverke, & Isaksson, 1999). In light of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), when individuals perceive their resources (e.g., stable employment) are threatened with loss, they might suffer from varied negative consequences.

Specifically, the direct supervisor of employees is considered as the agent of the organization, and a formal link between the organization and its front-line employees (Strutton, Toma, & Pelton, 1993). As such, when experiencing job security, individuals might be more satisfied with their direct supervisor, who might have instilled such security in employees. On the other hand, employees who fear losing their job might resent their supervisor for the possibility of losing the valued resource of one's job. Therefore, we anticipate that:

Hypothesis 1a: Job insecurity is associated with decreased supervisor satisfaction.

Within COR theory, in the face of a potential loss of a valuable resource, people are motivated to minimize further resource loss. Under the cloud of potential job loss, employees might withdraw from behaviors that further consume their resources in an attempt to minimize the net loss. Compliance with safety policies can at times be burdensome, requiring an employee to invest significant time and effort into engaging in behaviors that promote safety of others in their organization, following safety rules themselves, and ensuring their safety training is current, all of which could be perceived as factors that may deplete those resources. As such, individuals might withdraw from gaining safety knowledge, and consequently experience more accidents due to the fear of losing one's job. Indeed, previous cross-sectional (e.g., Jiang & Probst, 2014) and longitudinal studies (e.g., Probst & Brubaker, 2001), comprehensive reviews of over 90 studies (Quinlan, 2005), as well as controlled laboratory experiments (Probst, 2002), have found support for the adverse effects of job insecurity on occupational safety-related outcomes, including safety knowledge and workplace accidents. Therefore, we predict that:

Hypothesis 1(b-c): Job insecurity is associated with decreased safety knowledge (H1b), and increased accidents (H1c).

COR theory also proposes that the threat of resource loss in the form of job insecurity can have additional detrimental consequences such as increased stress and decreased physical well-being. Consistent with a previous meta-analysis with a total of 133 studies and 172 independent samples demonstrated the negative consequences of job insecurity on psychological and physical health (Cheng & Chan, 2008). Similar results emerged from a study across 10 European countries (László et al., 2010), and a longitudinal study (Burgard, Brand, & House, 2009). Therefore, based on the above theoretical reasoning and consistent with previous findings, we expect that:

Hypothesis 1d: Job insecurity is associated with increased health complaints.

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