



# Implications of job insecurity perceptions and job insecurity responses for psychological well-being, turnover intentions and reported risk behavior

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to test whether cognitively appraised level of job insecurity (job insecurity perceptions) and evaluative responses to a perceived level of job insecurity (job insecurity dissatisfaction and job insecurity behaviors) could relate differently to employee mental well-being, turnover intentions and on-the-job risk behavior. The significance of demographic characteristics (gender and age) as well as the implications of attitudinal variables (job satisfaction, job motivation and organizational commitment) and for the dependent variables was taken into account. Based on data from a self-completion questionnaire survey carried out among a representative sample of the Norwegian adult population ( $N=260$ ) results indicated that only job insecurity behaviors were indirectly related to turnover intentions and risk behavior via their impact on psychological well-being. The relative importance of the job insecurity dimensions for the dependent variables are discussed, as well as theoretical and practical implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations may find it necessary to reduce workforce numbers to remain competitive. This often results in an anticipation-phase where employees experience elevated insecurity related to their occupational future in the organization (Ferrie et al., 2001; Hesslink and van Vuuren, 1999; Probst, 2000). Due to more frequent organizational downsizing and privatization in industrialized countries the last two decades, research has increasingly focused on job insecurity and its expected negative outcomes.

Implications of job insecurity for individually (such as job satisfaction and health) as well as organizationally relevant outcomes (i.e., organizational commitment and work withdrawal behaviors) have been well explored (see Sverke et al. (2002) for a review). It has been suggested, however, that the next step in job insecurity research is to focus on different dimensions of this phenomenon (Davy et al., 1997; Probst, 2003; Sverke et al., 2002). Many studies have been conducted measuring job insecurity in terms of individuals' rationally perceived probability for stability and continuance in a given job. Indications have been given, however, that evaluative responses to perceived level of job insecurity should be considered as it gives a clearer picture on how different aspects of job insecurity relate to expected outcomes (Davy et al., 1997; Probst and Brubaker, 2001). For instance, dissatisfaction with level of job security is expected to be particularly relevant

for understanding the association between employment security and organizational safety outcomes (Probst, 2003; Probst and Brubaker, 2001).

Accordingly, measuring both perceptions of, as well as evaluative responses to job insecurity the present study aims to explore how different dimensions of job insecurity may relate to employee work attitudes, psychological well-being, turnover intentions and risk behavior. These relationships in particular have not been significantly addressed by previous research. First, however, theoretical support as well as past empirical findings for associations between job insecurity and these specific individually and organizationally relevant outcomes will be outlined. The hypothesized model in Fig. 1, illustrates the proposed relationships.

### 1.1. Attitudinal consequences of job insecurity

Following the psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995), job insecurity may threaten the expected balance in the give-and-take relationship between employee and employer (Probst, 2002b). When organizations fail to provide employees with expected levels of job security it is assumed to have consequences in terms of negative work attitudes. Thus, perceived job insecurity has been found to be predictive of how involved individuals find themselves to be in their job (Kuhnert and Palmer, 1991), and the extent of their organizational commitment (Davy et al., 1997). Another well-known attitudinal consequence is reduced job satisfaction. Insecure individuals tend to report less satisfaction with management, job features, pay and promotion opportunities

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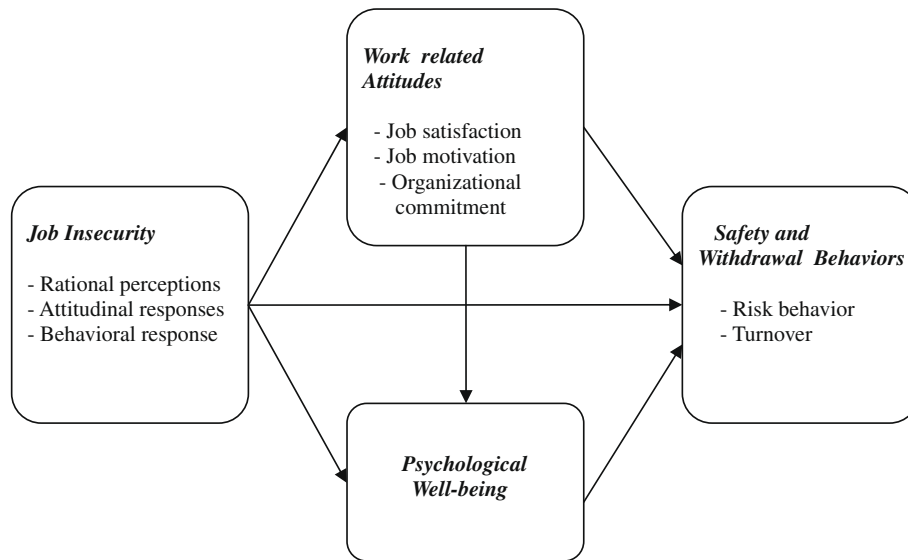


Fig. 1. A heuristic working model.

(Probst, 2002a; Probst and Brubaker, 2001; Rundmo and Iversen, 2007).

As illustrated by the heuristic working model above, indications have also been given that work related attitudes are associated with psychological well-being and, to some extent, have implications for employees' behavioral relationship with the organization (see e.g., Probst and Brubaker, 2001; Rundmo and Iversen, 2007).

### 1.2. Job insecurity and psychological well-being

Employment provides individuals with valuable experiences, social interactions and opportunities for personal development and skill use (Jahoda, 1982). Potential loss of such psychologically important factors would imply reduced individual well-being. Perceived threats of job loss are thus very likely to involve mental frustration. It has been theorized that anticipation of a stressful event may be as detrimental as, or even more detrimental for individual outcomes than the actual event itself (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Applied to employment relationships, this assumption implies that the experience of job insecurity may have at least as negative consequences as the incident of actual job loss itself. In accordance, a factory closure study by Kasl et al. (1975) suggested that negative mental symptoms among employees were particularly significant during the period preceding redundancy. Later research has also identified associations between job insecurity and negative psychological reactions such as anxiety, depression, and distress (Cooper and Melhuish, 1980; Roskies and Louis-Guerin, 1990). Employee job attitudes have shown, however, to have implications for how negatively job insecurity affects mental well-being (Probst, 2002a). The present study aims thus to account for the significance of both employee job satisfaction and workplace involvement when considering the impact of job insecurity perceptions and job insecurity responses on psychological well-being.

### 1.3. Organizationally relevant outcomes of job insecurity

#### 1.3.1. Turnover intentions

For the sake of clarity, turnover intention as presently defined is an employee's inclination to leave his or her organization. Actual turnover has been found to be very likely the result of intentions to withdraw (Steel and Ovalle, 1984).

According to Cavanaugh and Noe (1999), employee loyalty and intentions to stay with the organization decrease as a function of employers' disability to provide job security. The underlying logic of a relationship between job insecurity and turnover intentions, according to Ashford et al. (1989) is that individuals are inclined to withdraw from stressful situations. Job insecurity as any stressor should on this basis induce withdrawal responses.

In fact, exposure to downsizing processes (Kalimo et al., 2003; Moore et al., 2004), and perceived threats of job loss (Ashford et al., 1989) as well as insecurity related to loss of important job features, have been associated with turnover intentions (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984; Hellgren et al., 1999). Empirical evidence also exists, however, that job insecurity perceptions do not significantly predict withdrawal intentions when attitudinal variables such as job satisfaction as well as organizational commitment are controlled for (Arnold and Feldman, 1982; Davy et al., 1997). An explanation to the fact that this relationship has not been found to be direct may be that job insecurity perceptions do not reflect the importance of current employment. The present study therefore suggests that by measuring employees' evaluative responses to the level of job insecurity a direct impact of employment security on employee turnover intentions would be found.

#### 1.3.2. Risk behavior

Conditions of job insecurity may have negative implications for employee work performance. Less secure workers have been found with significantly higher levels of absenteeism and work task avoidance, when compared with more secure employees (Probst, 1999).

Some research also supports an association between job insecurity and safety violations. In fact, job insecure workers are found to engage in risk related behaviors when they perceive their job conditions to be dissatisfying (Rundmo and Iversen, 2007). Indications have also been given that level of employee safety motivation is crucial to whether job insecurity perceptions have an impact on risk behavior (Probst and Brubaker, 2001). It should be noted, however, that risk behavior refers to non-compliance with safety regulations and does not reflect any sensation-seeking tendencies (Rundmo and Iversen, 2007).

Although previous empirical work suggests a positive association, the relationship between job insecurity and risk behavior is not indicated to be direct. Drawing on the theory of reasoned

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