



# A self-consistency motivation analysis of employee reactions to job insecurity: The roles of organization-based self-esteem and proactive personality

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## ABSTRACT

Despite consistent evidence that job insecurity has negative effects on employee outcomes, further investigation into the mechanisms underpinning these influences remains desired. The psychological contract perspective may not be adequate to explain the negative effect of job insecurity, especially when considering the trend of proactive perspective for work. To extend explanations beyond the psychological contract theory and invoke a self-consistency motivational argument, we propose that employees' self-evaluation of their worth within an organization (i.e., organization-based self-esteem, OBSE) can incrementally explain the negative influence of job insecurity. Furthermore, we hypothesize that job insecurity would more strongly impair employees' OBSE for those who have more proactive personalities, resulting in more negative influences on their job performance and affective commitment. Tests of related hypotheses, with a sample of 176 subordinate–supervisor dyads from China, support our hypotheses. We discuss the implications of these findings for research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

Unpredictable economic conditions and strong business competition have prompted downsizing, mergers, acquisitions, and other structural changes within companies, resulting in heightened perceptions of job insecurity among employees. Job insecurity refers to individuals' perceptions that their jobs are at risk and they are powerless to maintain desired job continuity (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Shoss, 2017). Previous studies, including two meta-analyses (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke, Hellgren, & Naswall, 2002), have shown that job insecurity leads to a withdrawal response (e.g., Davy, Kinicki, & Scheck, 1997; Huang, Wellman, Ashford, Lee, & Wang, 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wang, Hu, Hurst, & Yang, 2014) and has a detrimental influence on employees' job performance (e.g., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006; Huang, Niu, Ashford, & Lee, 2012; Lee, Bobko, & Chen, 2006; Wang, Lu, & Siu, 2015) and affective commitment (e.g., Ashford et al., 1989; Davy et al., 1997; Lee et al., 2006). Despite this evidence, the research examining the mechanisms that account for job insecurity's influence on employee outcomes is rather

limited. Job performance and affective commitment have been frequently examined as the outcome variables in job insecurity research and are important to both organization and employees (e.g., Cheng & Chan, 2008; Lee et al., 2006; Shoss, 2017; Sverke et al., 2002). Therefore, we use them as the dependent variables in our study.

Previous studies relied primarily on social exchange mechanisms to derive the mediating processes through which job insecurity influences employees. Employees are said to be motivated by a desire to maintain a reciprocal or balanced relationship with their organization in terms of inducements and contributions (Blau, 1964). Should they believe that their organization has not fulfilled its contractual obligations, they perceive the psychological contract between the organization and them as having been breached (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Rousseau, 1989). These studies have argued that employees experiencing job insecurity perceive a breach of their psychological contract with the organization and react by reducing their work effort for and commitment to the organization in return (Ashford et al., 1989; Davy et al., 1997; De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006; Kraimer, Wayne, Liden, & Sparrowe, 2005; Lo & Aryee, 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992). However, we argue that an

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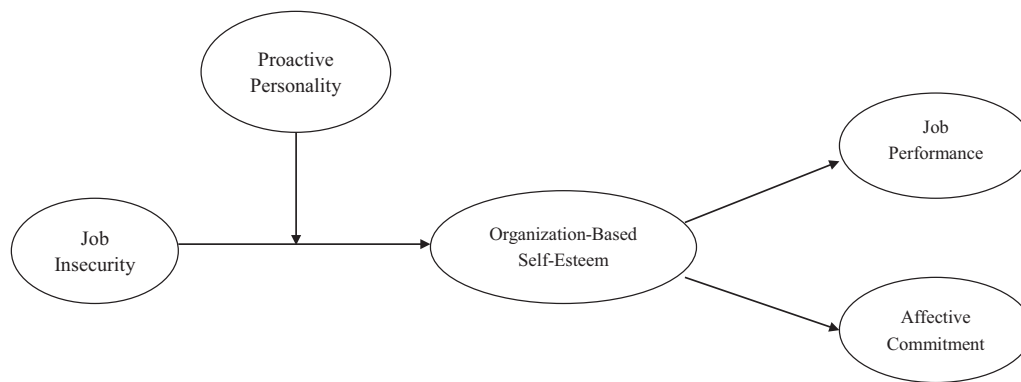


Fig. 1. Hypothesized research model.

Note: Perceived psychological contract breach is controlled as an alternative mediator in this model.

explanation of a psychological contract cannot fully explain why and how job insecurity exerts an influence on employee outcomes. In today's world, characterized by portable careers, self-driven careers, and frequent job changes, job security may not necessarily be essential to a psychological contract because many employees, especially those with highly proactive personalities, understand that organizations can no longer guarantee and have stopped expecting it (King, 2000; Lam, Liang, Ashford, & Lee, 2015; Parker, Morgeson, & Johns, 2017; Roehling, Cavanaugh, Moynihan, & Boswell, 2000). Proactive employees view organizations primarily as offering opportunities for enrichment, education, and self-development rather than as providing stable jobs or structured career paths (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Parker et al., 2017; Roehling et al., 2000; Strubler & Redekop, 2010). Consistent with this trend, recent work design studies and management practices have emphasized the proactive perspective, which suggests that under uncertain and highly competitive environments, organizations rely on employees to take the initiative to change how work is executed (Grant & Parker, 2009; Oldham & Fried, 2016; Pang, Chua, & Chu, 2008; Parker et al., 2017). Gaining, keeping, and growing such employees are the cornerstones of an organization's human resource activities (Clarke, 2013; Lam, Lee, Taylor, & Zhao, 2018; Peterson, 2005; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001; Yeung, 2006). Therefore, we argue that when employees feel their jobs are insecure, they may not perceive a significant psychological contract breach but may doubt whether they are competent, trusted, valued members in the current organizations and thus may feel demeaned personally (Liu, Hui, Lee, & Chen, 2013; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989; Rogers & Ashforth, 2017). We suggest that people's self-views matter because positive self-regard is considered an essential building block in human resource-based competitive strategies (Lau, Lam, & Wen, 2014; McAllister & Bigley, 2002; Swann, Chang, & Katie, 2007). To sum up, the theoretical arguments and empirical findings outlined above suggest that we need to look beyond psychological contract theory to identify the suitable theories and mediating mechanisms that can better explain why and how job insecurity influences proactive employees.

Therefore, our first contribution is to use the self-consistency motivational theory (Korman, 1970, 1976, 2001) to propose that organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) (Pierce et al., 1989) can explain the negative effect of job insecurity on proactive employees. OBSE refers to employees' perceptions of themselves as competent and need-satisfying members of organizations (Pierce et al., 1989). The self-consistency motivational theory suggests that people's self-esteem is formed around their social and organizational experiences and, in turn, plays a significant role in determining their attitudes and behaviors (Korman, 1970, 1976, 2001; Lau et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2005; Wu, Birtch, Chiang Flora, & Zhang, 2018; Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee, 2016). In an organizational context, job insecurity can damage employees'

OBSE, and this damaged OBSE leads employees to perform poorly according to their perceived (and now reduced) capability and to commit less to organizations where their value is not well recognized. Our study thus provides a new theoretical lens to examine the negative effects of job insecurity.

Our second contribution is to further elaborate how the self-consistency motivational mechanism might play out in a world where an increasing number of employees are becoming proactive about their jobs and careers (Cai et al., 2015; Maurer & Chapman, 2013; Parker et al., 2017; Strubler & Redekop, 2010). More specifically, we suggest that a proactive personality would influence the effect of job insecurity on employees' OBSE and serve as a boundary condition. Proactive people are characterized as those seeking out opportunities, showing initiative, and persevering to bring about meaningful change (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000; Fuller & Marler, 2009; Marinova, Peng, Lorinkova, Dyne, & Chiaburu, 2015). Researchers and managers tend to believe that some employees suffer more from job insecurity because they are vulnerable — in other words, if employees are proactive enough, they would suffer less from job insecurity (e.g., Ashford et al., 1989; Cheng & Chan, 2008; Seibert et al., 2001; Shoss, 2017). However, we suggest that job insecurity more strongly impairs proactive employees' OBSE and has worse effects on employee outcomes because proactive employees are purported to select, create, and influence work situations that increase the likelihood of job and career success (Crant, 2000; Grant & Parker, 2009; Parker et al., 2017; Seibert et al., 2001). Therefore, they are more strongly motivated by perceptions of having self-control in work, receiving respect from organizations, and being supported in job and career success by organizations. Accordingly, they will tend to put more value on and be more sensitive to treatment from organizations. As such, we propose that experiencing job insecurity is particularly impactful to their sense of self. Such perceptions especially lower the proactive employees' OBSE. Thus, using the self-consistency theory, we examine at what point job insecurity lowers OBSE and why job insecurity relates to decreased job performance and affective commitment. Taken together, our theoretical framing of the mediating mechanism and boundary condition can be proposed as a moderated mediation model for better explaining the effects of job insecurity on employees. We depict this research model in Fig. 1.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Job insecurity

Job insecurity occurs only in the case of involuntary loss, and the perceived potential loss can span from permanent loss of the job itself to loss of some valued job features, such as organizational status, opportunities for promotion, freedom to schedule work, and organizational resources (Ashford et al., 1989; Shoss, 2017). Important antecedents of

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