



Job Insecurity Revisited: Reformulating with Affect

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ABSTRACT

Job insecurity augurs negative consequences for organizations such as reduced commitment and trust and intention to leave the organization. There is an ongoing debate whether to use multidimensional or global measures of job insecurity. This paper examines conceptual and operational considerations of job insecurity proposed by Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) that prompted the first multidimensional operationalization of their theory by Ashford, Lee, and Bobko (1989). The paper proposes a reformulated approach to measuring job insecurity that introduces affect as part of the measure thereby advocating multidimensional measurement of job insecurity while offering managers a more parsimonious basis for measuring this important organizational variable.

Introduction

Two approaches have been used in the conceptualization and measurement of job insecurity: the “bigger is better” approach (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984) that uses multidimensional measures and the “parsimony is preferable” approach (Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison, R. & Pinneau, 1975; Jacobson, 1991; Johnson Messe, & Crano, 1984) that uses global measures. This paper looks at both the theoretical expansion of job insecurity and pragmatic measurement issues relevant for managers’ wishing to find out if their employees are experiencing job insecurity.

The starting point for this paper is Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt’s (1984) seminal article about job insecurity. They cautioned that the research community had failed to fully understand the construct scope of job insecurity, which they defined as “perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation” (p. 438). Central to the Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt’s formulation was the view that job insecurity is comprised of two dimensions, threat to the job and threat to the job features. The authors wished to accomplish four objectives in their theoretical exposition: 1. Correct conceptual inadequacies in treatment of the construct; 2. specify the content domain of the construct; 3. show how individual differences moderate the way people experience and react to job insecurity; and 4. identify reactions to job insecurity within a climate of organizational decline.



This paper concerns itself with the construct conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of job insecurity. It critiques the theoretical expansion of job insecurity that includes job features and powerlessness as part of the construct. The paper argues that a parsimonious solution to job insecurity measurement is achievable via attention to its affective component. This approach is useful to practicing managers who wish to understand and measure job insecurity.

Ashford et al. (1989) responded to Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt's call for a multidimensional operationalization of job insecurity by constructing a measure that faithfully operationalized their conceptualization. The measure utilized five subscales that tapped into the severity of threat. Table 1 shows the five subscales of Ashford, Lee and Bobko's job insecurity measure and the item counts of each subscale.

Table 1
Ashford, Lee, and Bobko (1989) Multiplicative Job Insecurity Scale

Subscale	Number of Items
Importance of job	10
Likelihood of losing job	10
Importance of job features	17
Likelihood of losing job features	17
Powerlessness	3

The multiplicative operationalization of the subscales shows job insecurity = (severity of threat) x (powerlessness to resist), where severity of threat is comprised of threat to the job and threat to the job's features. Each of these two dimensions of threat is comprised of two components: The importance or value of the job or job feature and the perceived likelihood of change to the job or job feature.

Different assumptions and underlying theory guide conceptualizations of job insecurity. A selective summary of approaches to conceptualizing, operationalizing and measuring job insecurity is presented in Table 2. Although there are other contributors to the topic of job insecurity, it is believed that Table 2 is representative of the literature that addresses global versus multidimensional measures of job insecurity.

Table 2
Summary of Approaches to Job Insecurity

Conceptual				
Author(s)	Date	Framework	Operationalization	Scale
Caplan et al.	1975	Psychological	Cognitive Additive	4-item
		Cognitive		Global



Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt	1984	Expectancy	Cognitive Multiplicative	None
Johnson et al.	1984	Psychological	Affective Additive	7-item
Ashford et al.	1989	Affective Expectancy	Cognitive Multiplicative	Global 60-item
Hartley et al.	1991	Expectancy	Cognitive Multiplicative	Multiplicative, 5 subscales 3-item
		Stress/Coping,		Global
Role Theory				

Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) conceptualized job insecurity as a multidimensional construct modeled, in large part, upon expectancy theory type formulations (Vroom, 1964). This is a decidedly cognitive theoretical perspective.

Both Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) and Hartley et al. (1991) did not include an affective component in their operationalization of job insecurity. In fact, among the researchers listed in Table 2, only Johnson et al. (1984) conceptualized and measured the affective element of job insecurity. Their item wording illustrates a concern with affect, for example, “I am currently worried about the possibility of losing my job”. It is worth mentioning the dictionary treatment of insecurity as it includes apprehension in its descriptions. Apprehension has been defined as the fearful anticipation of the future, dread. This is certainly consistent with the literature that recognized the inter-relationship of job insecurity, job loss, stress and coping (Caplan et al., 1975; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Because the stress and coping literature recognizes the importance of affect but the job insecurity literature has largely avoided inclusion of affect, this paper argues that affect needs to be infused into the operationalization and measurement of job insecurity. Aside from the appropriateness of this from a theoretic standpoint, other efficiencies and advantages may be achieved.

The ultimate challenge of any conceptualization, operationalization or measure of job insecurity is illustrated in a remarkable case analysis of job insecurity (Hartley, 1991). Hartley interviewed union line workers in a firm that would dissolve within 18 months. An astonishing 37 percent of line workers who participated in the study experienced little or very little job insecurity. How do we explain this high proportion of workers who did not fear the imminent loss of their job? Perhaps they did not know that they were going to lose their jobs. Perhaps the firm was performing well and only suddenly went out of business. Perhaps they did know that the company would dissolve and were in a state of denial. Perhaps they did not experience job insecurity because they believed they had the skills to find another job. Perhaps job insecurity was more than the result of an objective threat to one’s job and also included affective concern



with that threat. This paper reasons that job insecurity is most likely to be accurately identified when an individual recognizes threats to her job and is worried about those threats.

Combining Cognition and Affect in Job Insecurity

This new question is one that raises the concern of reformulation. No approach to job insecurity has yet to identify both cognitive and affective elements of the construct. Rather than the fundamentally cognitive multiplicative approach to job insecurity, it is believed that job insecurity comprises both cognition and affect. This approach is thought to offer greater conceptual clarity and operational parsimony. Job insecurity is therefore defined as insecurity resulting from threat to one's job continuity. This takes the following form:

$$\text{Job insecurity} = (\text{cognitive threat} + \text{worry})$$

Like existing theory, this too is a multidimensional approach. On the surface this is a far leaner operationalization of job insecurity. This is particularly germane, as item counts on job insecurity surveys are tending to increase (Rosenblatt & Ruvio, 1996). In addition, it is consistent with theory that treats job insecurity in both cognitive and affective terms, but is the first to link them in a single construct.

Importantly, this approach better represents the individual's experience of job insecurity. It further trims the measurement of the construct as cognition is available in global measures such as that of Hartley et al. (1991). Sample items include "To what extent in your opinion are you likely to lose your job in the near future?" and "To what extent, in your judgment, are you likely to be employed in your present job three months from now?" Affective measurement of job insecurity is available in instruments such as Johnson et al. (1984). A sample item is "I am currently worried about the possibility of losing my job."

Taken in full, this conceptualization and operationalization of job insecurity offers an approach that is believed to reflect the fullness of the job insecurity construct across both thoughts and feelings. Also, this conceptualization allows researchers a fluid means by which to move from concept to measurement, allowing to tap into content domain with a maximum of parsimony and a minimum of expectancy based calculations. This grants an appropriate separation of causes and construct. Obviously, the test of this approach will be the ultimate arbiter of its utility. Ashford et al. (1989) provide the model for such a test. We recommend research that compares instruments of job insecurity in terms of causes and consequences of the construct. This type of comparison may determine the importance of affect in job insecurity research.

Summary

This paper presents a rationale for the inclusion of affect in the measurement of job insecurity. This paper, therefore, differs with research that has largely viewed job insecurity in purely cognitive terms (Ashford et al., 1989; Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984). It is believed



that practicing managers can benefit from this approach, as support for this revised position would yield more parsimonious measures of job insecurity. Research is therefore recommended that compares existing measures of job insecurity with a measure proposed in this paper that outlines cognitive and affective measurement of job insecurity.



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