

Flexicurity as a moderator of the relationship between job insecurity and psychological well-being

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Flexicurity has been heralded as the solution to simultaneously maintain the well-being of employees through employment security while allowing employers to benefit from flexibility. This paper examines one of the claimed benefits that countries with flexicurity policies will reduce the stress on employees who experience job insecurity. More specifically, it is argued that more generous unemployment benefits along with active labour market policies to facilitate rapid re-employment reduces the anxiety associated with insecurity. Analyses of two international data sets found little evidence for this moderation of the link between insecurity and well-being in countries that are assumed to be exemplars of flexicurity. The economic rationality behind these claims is questioned, and a psychological approach to job insecurity is suggested as an alternative.

Keywords: flexicurity, job (in)security, stress, psychological well-being
JEL classifications: I38, J63, J81

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) labour markets have been undergoing many changes over the past few decades, sometimes in response to specific EU policies (for instance enlargement or to increase labour market participation) and in other cases in response to global economic, political and technological changes. These changes have often been accompanied by concerns that the quality of jobs will suffer if labour markets become more flexible. More specifically, there is a widespread apprehension that many of these changes will result in a reduction in job security. The solution that has dominated EU policy discourse over the past decade has been "flexicurity". This paper examines one of the claims made about the way flexicurity policies can combine macro-level economic efficiency with

protection of the workforce from the negative consequences of job insecurity.

Job insecurity

Job insecurity has received much attention over the past two decades from social scientists, and much is already known about its effects. To provide a context for this paper, some important points from that literature will be summarised, although a full review of the literature would be redundant given several other recent comprehensive reviews (Sverke et al., 2002; Burchell, 2005; De Witte, 2005; Cheng and Chan, 2008).

Firstly, it is important to be clear what we mean by job insecurity, as there is much confusion and inconsistency in the literature. For this paper, job insecurity is defined as an employee's perception of

50 the likelihood of the losing his or her current job
involuntarily, say in the next 6 or 12 months. This is
clearly not an objective measure, and indeed there is
evidence that, in representative surveys, many more
employees are worried about losing their jobs than
55 will actually lose them (Dickerson and Green,
2006). However, if we are concerned with their
“subjective” well-being, then their “perceptions”
of the risk of job loss are important per se, even if
those fears are exaggerated or unfounded. For
60 instance, their anxiety will be a function of their
own assessment of the risk of losing their jobs, as
will the effect of job insecurity on their job search
behaviour, their work motivation and on their long-
term planning of decisions concerning housing
and fertility. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, no
65 attempt is made to measure the objective likelihood
of job loss nor will job insecurity be measured by
proxy through measures of average job tenure or
turnover rates. These measures correlate poorly at
best with subjective job insecurity (OECD, 1998);
as Turnbull and Wass (1999) show, involuntary job
losses make up only a small minority of quits even
in recessions in the UK. And, cross-nationally,
there is no link between subjective job insecurity
and turnover—e.g. Denmark has a relatively short
70 average tenure but high levels of subjective job
security (Auer, 2007). Finally, job contracts have
also been used in some studies as a measure of job
insecurity, although this is again unsatisfactory. As
Booth et al. (2000) argue, international differences
in the prevalence of temporary job contracts reflect
differences in employment protection legislation
(EPL) more than differences in job security.

85 Secondly, it is important to note that job insecurity
is not only studied because of what might
follow—unemployment or re-employment in
a lower paid or lower quality job. Numerous studies
have shown that the very perception that one is
likely to lose one’s job is itself sufficient to cause
90 symptoms of anxiety and depression. The magni-
tude of this effect is not trivial; typically the differ-
ence on measures of psychological well-being
between secure and insecure employees is about
the same size as the difference between the means
95 for all employees and the unemployed (Burchell,

1994). This finding has been replicated consistently
across a number of surveys, both cross-sectional
and longitudinal. Furthermore, qualitative studies
have provided rich descriptions of the nature of
individuals’ concerns about losing their jobs. Nolan
100 (2002, 2009) analysed semi-structured interviews
of UK employees to explore these concerns and
found that the most widely expressed worries for
both men and women are straightforwardly
economically based, for instance worries about
105 not being able to pay the mortgage or other bills.
Other anxieties expressed also included less nar-
rowly focussed economically based concerns, such
as the stress of not being able to plan for the future
or concern about one’s role as breadwinner in the
110 household.

There has been much heated debate about the
changing patterns of job insecurity over time. Many
social commentators and social theorists have taken
for granted that there has been a recent dramatic rise
in job insecurity and have even characterised the
current era as “the age of uncertainty”. Fevre
115 (2007) criticises these extravagant claims and, like
several others (Felstead et al., 2000; Green, in
press), shows that levels of job insecurity have been
quite stable in most industrial countries over the
1990s and the early 2000s (at the time of writing,
we do not have good evidence of the effect of the
120 “credit crunch” on job insecurity, although it is
probable that there *has* been a significant rise in
2008 and 2009). There is virtually no good time-
series data on subjective job insecurity before the
1990s, but an analysis of retrospective data does
point strongly to a period of low levels of job
insecurity in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, fol-
125 lowed by a significant rise between the late 1970s
and the mid-1980s, coinciding with the dramatic
increase in unemployment that characterised the
early Thatcher period (Burchell, 1993, 2002).

When journalists, academics and policy-makers
started to discuss the implications of high levels of
job insecurity in the early 1990s, this was accom-
panied by calls for policies that would return us to
the low levels of job insecurity that marked the
130 “golden era” following World War II. In the UK,
criticisms of job insecurity were continuously

levelled at John Major's Conservative government, with calls for stronger job protection measures, and some companies adopted "Zero Redundancy" policies (Burchell et al., 2002). There were promises that things would be better under Labour, although after the 1997 election job insecurity slid off the political agenda with MP Peter Hain's move from the shadow Employment office to the Welsh Office. As Glyn and Wood (2000) argued, with New Labour there was a clear message that a competitive and flexible labour market was more important than EPL. Evidence for the effect of EPL on job security is mixed, but the analyses by Clark and Postel-Vinay (2005) suggests, surprisingly, that EPL actually reduces job security.

Flexicurity

This perceived pessimistic dichotomy, that job security and labour market flexibility are mutually exclusive, came to an end when Denmark and the Netherlands proposed that it was possible to "have your cake and eat it"—to simultaneously achieve employment security and flexibility. Thus, a new term was created, "Flexicurity". The definition of security had moved on, from being secure in one's current job, to a more generalised knowledge that one will be employed, but not necessarily for the same employer. Income security was also important, and this was addressed in flexicurity policies through ensuring that the unemployment benefits were generous enough to avoid hardship in periods between employment. Denmark is regularly held up as an example to other EU member states. For instance, in the EU 2007 Communication on flexicurity, it is stated that "The Danish labour market shows a successful combination of flexibility and security, offering flexible labour laws and relatively low job protection, extensive efforts on lifelong learning and active labour market policies, and a generous social security system" (36). The Netherlands also receives high praise with its "drastic reduction of unemployment and a strong job creation" (37) in the 1990s attributed to its flexicurity policies.

Definitions of flexicurity vary, but there are four central themes according to Wilthagen and Tros

(2004). Firstly, employers should have the ability to hire and fire without undue cost or bureaucratic constraints, thus achieving productive systems that can respond rapidly to changes in demand caused inter alia by technological innovation, changing fashions, business cycles or market fluctuations. But employees need to be protected from the welfare costs of such fluctuations. Thus, the second ingredient of flexicurity is generous levels of unemployment benefits, so that the loss of a job is not aggravated by poverty in unemployment. The third ingredient is active labour market policies promoting training and employability, so that unemployed workers can be rapidly provided with marketable skills that will hasten their return to employment. And, finally, it is assumed that this win-win situation will be maintained by a high-trust dialogue between the social partners whereby the antagonistic relationships between employers, trade unions and government are replaced by cooperation and negotiated compromise to maintain this balance, thus optimising economic and welfare costs and benefits.

Several welfare benefits ought to arise from this model. Firstly, economic efficiency, it is assumed, will keep economic growth high and unemployment low. Secondly, those individuals who are unfortunate enough to become unemployed should have the advantages of a training system that gives them the ability to achieve rapid re-employment; thus, unemployment, and particularly long-term unemployment, should be kept low. These arguments have been set out in the European Commission's Green Paper on labour law and flexicurity in 2006, and then advocated more strongly in the European Commission's 2007 communication. These proposals have generally been welcomed by the social partners, although some scepticism has been expressed. For instance, John Monks, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, has questioned whether the security components of flexicurity are a sop, "a cover for less employment protection, and for weaker labour law" (2007).

Finally, there is the implicit assumption that job insecurity will no longer be such a source of anxiety or depression, as employees will be more confident that, even if they do lose their job, they will

experience neither long-term unemployment nor great financial loss. As the 2007 communication states, “Workers need sufficient security to plan their lives and careers ...” (7). This final perceived benefit of flexicurity policies is a plausible claim, but one that has not been subject to empirical test.

Flexicurity policies are built upon a “homo economicus” model of well-being. It is assumed that the effects of job insecurity are harmful to the individual because of fears about the economic consequences of job loss and unemployment. Following on this line of logic (i.e. softening the economic consequences of job loss through more generous unemployment benefit levels and rapid re-employment), it is argued that the effects of job insecurity on well-being can be ameliorated.

But the economic consequences of job insecurity and possible job loss might be just one minor component of the psychological impact. A similar question, concerning the reasons for the poor psychological well-being during periods of unemployment, has caused an ongoing debate among psychologists for many decades. Certainly, in the 1930s, there was clear evidence of extreme poverty among the unemployed in the town of Marenthal and also clear evidence that the families with higher incomes fared better when the main breadwinner became unemployed (Jahoda et al., 1933). There is evidence that, with the greater affluence in more recent times, the economic effects of unemployment are no longer the main mechanisms accounting for the low well-being of the unemployed. Jahoda (1982) was one of the first to argue that while the manifest reason for employment is financial, the effects of unemployment on psychological health are now more attributable to latent aspects of employment. Jahoda listed five such latent aspects of employment: structured time, enforced activity, social contact, identity and a collective purpose. This spawned a number of similar theories, embellishments and critiques (e.g. Fryer, 1986; Warr, 1987), including some specifically to test whether economic or social and psychological variables are better predictors of psychological symptoms in unemployment (Fryer, 1992; Nordenmark and Strandh, 1999).

Countries that have adopted flexicurity-type policies are not claiming to have eradicated job insecurity—far from it, employers being able to hire and fire without rigid obstacles is central to flexicurity. Rather, we would expect that those countries that have adopted flexicurity policies will have ameliorated the link between job insecurity and poor psychological well-being.

This paper sets out to test this particular claim. If it is true, then one would expect the correlation between the perceived risk of losing one’s job and psychological well-being to be reduced in countries that are closer to the ideal flexicurity model (such as Nordic countries) than countries that are purportedly characterised by rigidities in employment legislation and practices, and by the absence of active labour market policies (such as some Mediterranean countries). Note that there may still be differences in the aggregate levels of subjective well-being between countries that are attributable to a number of other factors, both actual and methodological. For instance, there may be real differences in well-being attributable to social capital, and there may be differences in cultural norms concerning the responses to questionnaire items asking about symptoms of malaise, or nuanced differences in the translation of questionnaire items measuring well-being. Consequently, the data analysis section of this paper is not interested in differences in the mean levels of well-being between countries, but rather in differences between the relationship of perceived job insecurity with well-being. In order to test this more thoroughly, two different data sets will be used, the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 2005 and the European Social Survey (ESS) 2006. They have slightly different measures of job insecurity, and very different measures of well-being, so that the analysis of two different data sets (if they arrive at similar conclusions) should make a stronger case than either analysis alone.

The European working conditions survey

The EWCS is a repeated cross-sectional survey of working conditions, health and safety matters,

[AQ2]

320 quality of working life and well-being. The
fourth wave was conducted in 2005, and
325 included a total of 31 countries: all the EU25
countries, Romania and Bulgaria (which joined in
2007), Norway and Switzerland, and Turkey and
Croatia. The sample size was 1000 in larger
countries and 600 in smaller countries, interviewed
in their own homes. Respondents were drawn
from the population of employees and the self-
employed who normally worked for at least
330 1 hour/week.

Measures

Job security was measured by asking “How much
do you agree or disagree with the following state-
ment describing some aspects of your job”; one of
335 the list of items was “I might lose my job in the
next 6 months”. Responses were to “Strongly
agree” (5.5%), “Agree” (9.7%), “Neither agree
nor disagree” (11.9%), “Disagree” (26.0%),
“Strongly disagree” (41.5%), “Don’t know”
340 (5.0%) and “Refusal” (0.5%).¹

Well-being was measured by first asking “Does
your work affect your health or not?”. Respondents
who answered yes were then asked “How does it
[your job] affect your health?” and were presented
345 with a list of possible health problems from work.
Previous exploratory analyses (Burchell et al.,
2007) had divided the list of symptoms into sub-
scales that were related to ergonomic problems (e.g.
backache), toxic environments (e.g. skin problems)
350 and stress. The stress sub-scale was used here con-
sisting of “Headaches”, “Stomach aches”, “Heart
disease”, “Stress”, “Overall fatigue”, “Sleeping
problems”, “Anxiety” and “Irritability”. As can
be seen in Figure 1, there is clear evidence, as one
355 would expect, of a relationship between job inse-
curity and this measure.

The crucial question is whether this relationship
is moderated by each country’s level of flexicurity
policies.

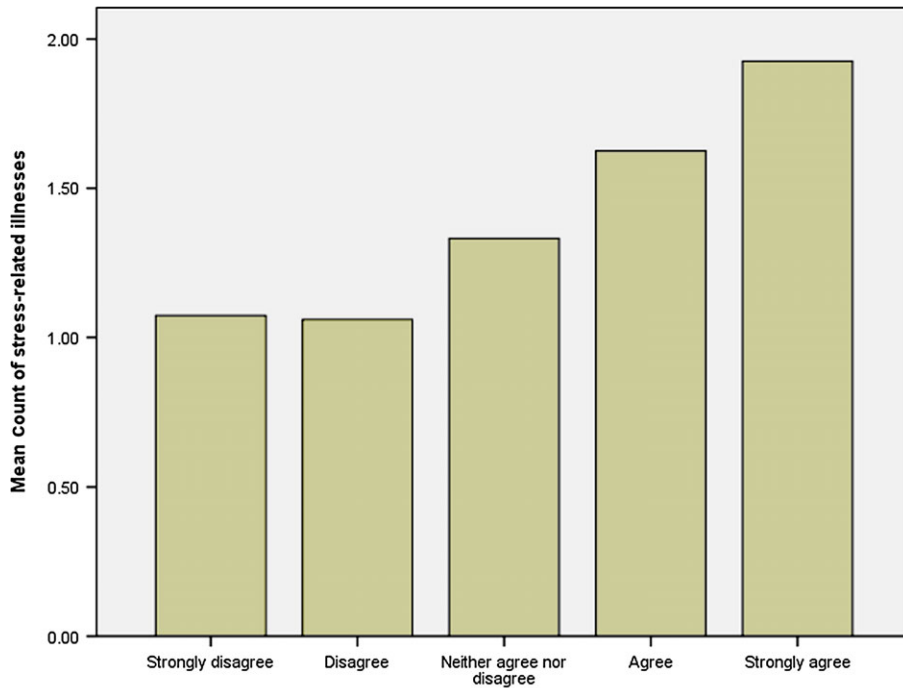
360 Figure 2 depicts the correlations graphically for
each country (Spearman’s ρ non-parametric corre-
lations are used as both variables are highly
skewed). It can be seen that for the majority of

countries the correlation is positive, such that
365 higher insecurity is associated with more stress-
related symptoms; three countries have unexpected
negative correlations (Portugal, Malta and Slove-
nia), but these are all very weak and are not
statistically significant.

One country, Turkey, has a higher correlation
370 than any other by a small but clear margin. This
provides some supporting evidence that the lack of
flexicurity policies leads to the effects of job
insecurity being more severe. As Tangian (2008)
argues, Turkey practices, in many ways, the
375 extreme opposite of flexicurity policies. It has strict
EPL (OECD, 2004), and simultaneously a very
high proportion of employees do not have a contract
of employment. According to Tangian’s (2008)
analysis of the 2005 EWCS, Turkey has the highest
380 coefficients of both flexibility and precariousness.
The stark economic facts of Turkey’s labour market
do indeed suggest that insiders have less to worry
about, while those who worry about losing their
jobs do indeed have a lot to worry about, as
385 unemployment benefits are low and the gap
between insiders and outsiders is wide.

Beyond this one case, however, there seems to be
no evidence of any further “systematic” differen-
ces between the countries. One might have
390 expected, for instance this correlation to be lower
in the Nordic countries, but there is little or no
evidence for this. For example, Denmark and the
Netherlands, widely given as the two good practice
examples of flexicurity (e.g. Kok et al., 2003), are
395 both mid-table. Countries that are considered to be
low on flexicurity policies such as Ireland, Italy and
Spain are at the lower end of the table. Prima facie,
the rank-ordering of countries on this criterion
makes no intuitive sense and is uncorrelated with
400 any of the indices of flexicurity or related indices
(such as difficulty of hiring, difficulty of firing, EPL
(see Philips and Eamets (2007) and Tangian (2008)
for summaries).

Before attempting to explain this lack of relation-
365 ship, the ESS (2006) data set will also be examined
for evidence of the moderating effect of flexicurity
policies on the relationship between job insecurity
and well-being.



q37a. I might lose my job in the next 6 months.

[AQ24] Figure 1. Simple relationship between job insecurity and well-being (source: EWCS4).

European social survey (2006)

410 The the ESS is a biennial multicountry repeated
 cross-sectional survey covering over 30 nations.
 The third round, which was conducted in 2006,
 surveyed 30,949 people in total (including the un-
 employed and economically inactive). It is a ran-
 415 dom, nationally representative sample of
 individuals.

Measurements

420 Job insecurity was measured by asking “How
 likely would you say it is that you will become
 unemployed in the next 12 months. Would you
 say it was ...”. Responses were “Very likely”
 (2.2%), “Likely” (5.1%), “Not very likely”
 (19.6%) or “Not at all likely” (25.8%) and also
 425 “Not applicable”² (45.2%), “Refusal” (0.1%),
 “Don’t know” (1.9%) and “No answer” (0.2%).
 This question is clearly different from the EWCS in

two main respects: the 12-month reference period
 instead of the 6-month period, and it specifies “be-
 coming unemployed” rather than “losing your job”. Both measures are what psychologists cate-
 435 gorise as cognitive measures of job insecurity (i.e.
 measuring likelihood), rather than affective meas-
 ures (typically measuring the level of worry or con-
 cern about job security); thus the two questions are
 excellent variants for a constructive replication.

[AQ3]

In fact, if the mean job insecurity is computed for
 435 each of the countries included in both the EWCS4
 and the ESS3, then the ordering of the countries is
 remarkably similar with no country far from the
 regression line, as shown in Figure 3 (a curve fits
 440 the data even better, but that is not relevant here).

The ESS contains more conventional measures of
 well-being than the EWCS, reinforcing the use-
 445 fulness of these two surveys for a constructive rep-
 lication. Respondents were instructed “I will now
 read out a list of the ways you might have felt or

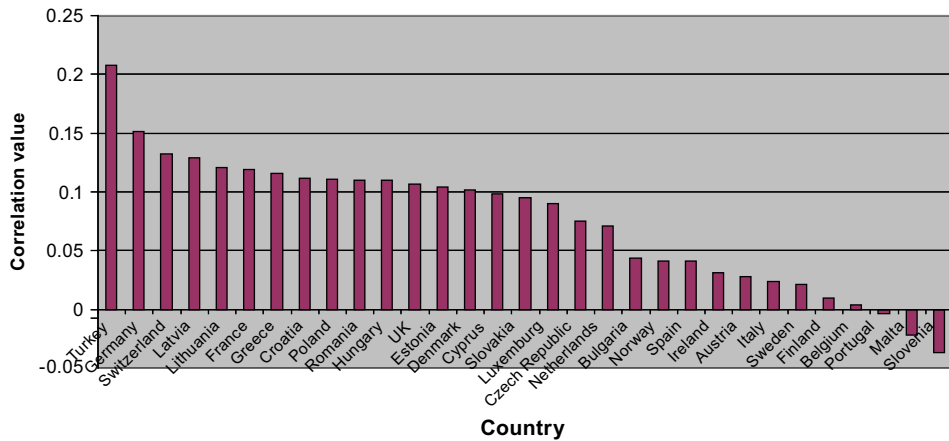


Figure 2. Non-parametric correlations between job insecurity and stress-related illnesses in 31 countries (source: EWCS4).

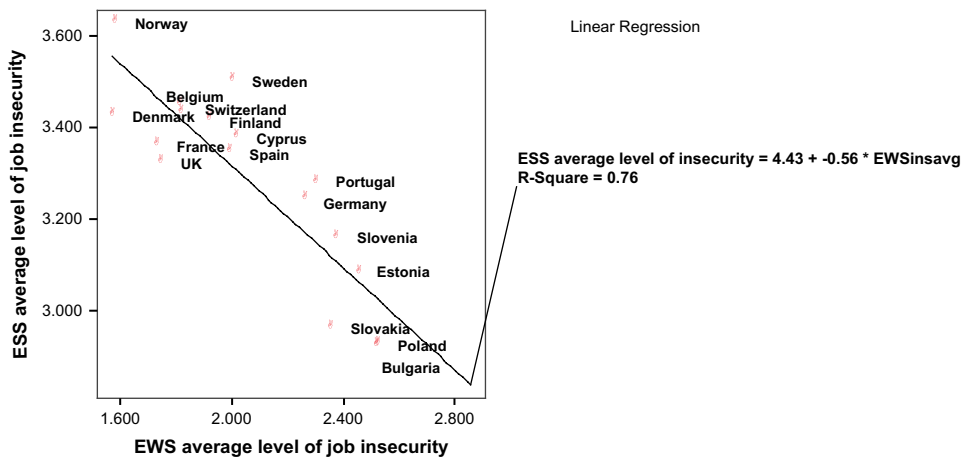


Figure 3. Country scatterplot: two measures of job insecurity (sources: EWCS4 and ESS3).

behaved during the past week. Using this card, please tell me how much of the time during the past week ...” (the response scale on the card was none or almost none of the time, some of the time, most of the time, all or almost all of the time, don’t know). The 10 items in the list were subject to an exploratory factor analysis, which produced a clear two-factor solution. The Eigen values for these two factors were 4.09 and 1.12, with a third (non-extracted) Eigen value of 0.81; the two extracted factors accounted for 52% of the total variance.

These two factors when rotated orthogonally (Varimax) corresponded to one factor loading on symptoms of anxiety and depression and one factor corresponding to quality of sleep:

Anxiety and depression items (factor loadings in parentheses)

- you felt sad? (0.75)
- you felt lonely? (0.73)
- you felt depressed? (0.70)
- you felt bored? (0.65)

- you felt anxious? (0.61)
- you felt that everything you did was an effort? (0.52)

Quality of sleep items:

- you felt really rested when you woke up in the morning? (-0.82)
- you felt calm and peaceful? (-0.66)
- you felt tired? (0.62)
- you felt that your sleep was restless? (0.56)

As there were two orthogonal well-being scales, the analyses were repeated for each scale.

The analyses were attempted to replicate as closely as possible the analyses with the EWCS data. Again, we can start by inspecting the relationship between job insecurity and well-being separately for each of the measures. As can be seen in Figures 4 and 5, in both cases we observe a monotonic relationship, as expected, showing that as job

insecurity increases, there is a corresponding increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression and decrease in the quality of sleep.

Yet again the analyses produced no evidence of any systematic differences between countries in the relationship between job insecurity and either of the two well-being scales (unfortunately Turkey, which gave the strongest evidence from the EWCS analyses, is not represented in the ESS3 data).

In a final attempt to find any evidence of the effect of flexicurity policies on the relationship between job insecurity and well-being, the countries were banded into groups corresponding approximately to welfare regimes. Such clusters were based on the widely adopted clusters based on Esping-Andersen's (1999) theory of welfare types. Other authors are critical of this particular clustering and point out that these clusters are flawed for other types of analyses, such as when considering working conditions (Peña-Casas and Pochet, 2009). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to

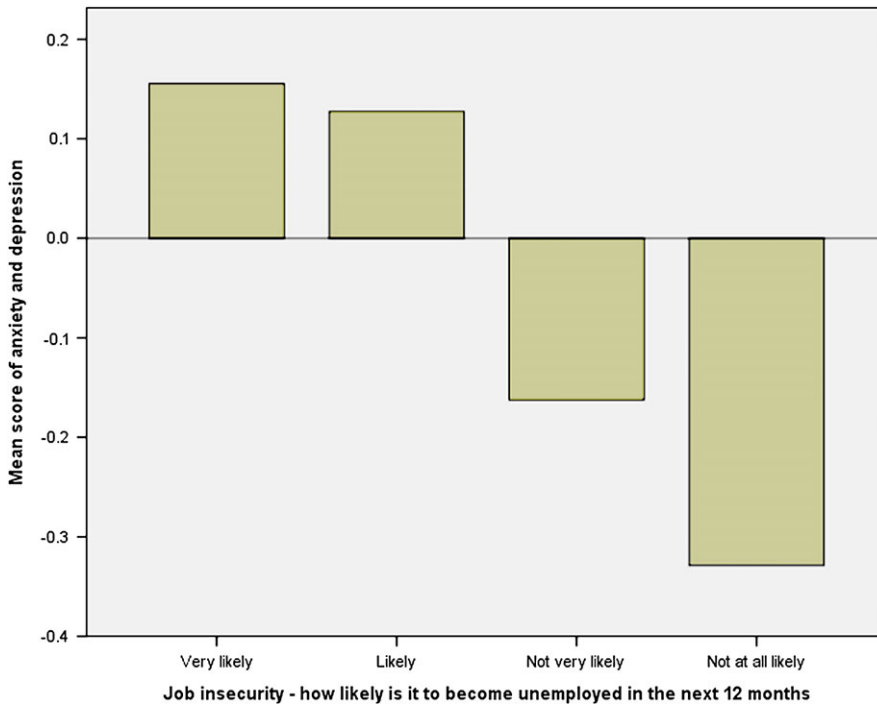


Figure 4. Job insecurity and symptoms of anxiety and depression (source: ESS3).

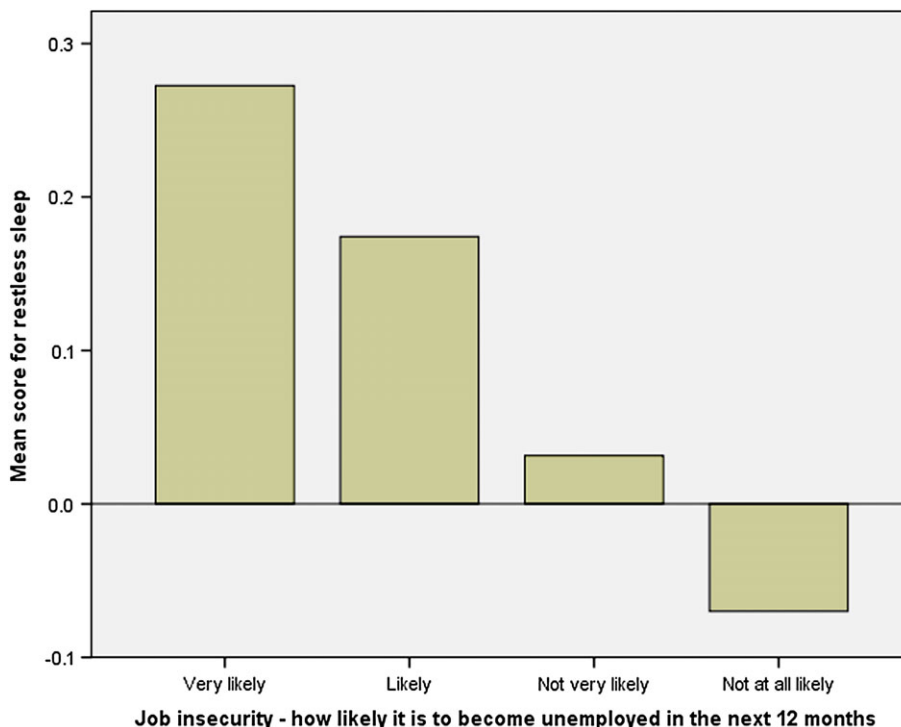


Figure 5. Job insecurity and quality of sleep (source: ESS3).

develop clusters that specifically correspond to qualitatively or quantitatively different types of flexicurity policies within Europe.

Separately for each of the two well-being measures, the mean scores were calculated for each country cluster by job insecurity cell. These results are plotted in Figures 6 and 7.

Let us examine Figure 6 carefully (note that, to overcome the small numbers of cases in the categories “very likely” and “likely” to become unemployed, these two categories were combined, but this did not change the results of the data analysis). Firstly, it is clear that there are systematic differences between the three lines, showing the effect of job insecurity on well-being, and this difference is significant if an analysis of variance (ANOVA) model is computed ($F(2, 12,012) = 78.7, p < 0.0005$). Similarly, there are highly significant differences between country groups ($F(4, 12,012) = 134.5, p < 0.0005$), although this

may be an artefact of translation or culture. Most interestingly, though, for the present analyses, is whether the lines in Figure 6 show any deviation from being parallel—in other words, has the gap in well-being been reduced by flexicurity policies? Figure 6 does show some weak evidence of this, such that the “continental countries” are more widely spread in well-being than the other country clusters, and this is just significant at the 5% level, but not at the 1% level (interaction term: $F(8, 12,012) = 2.3, p = 0.017$). Thus, there is no evidence that the Nordic countries have succeeded any more than the Southern, Eastern or Anglo-Saxon countries in this respect.

Figure 7 shows the same analyses for the measure of sleep disruption. Again, there is clear evidence of the effects of job insecurity on quality of sleep for each of the country groupings ($F(2, 12,012) = 42.4, p < 0.0005$), and again there is clear evidence of a difference in the level of this variable

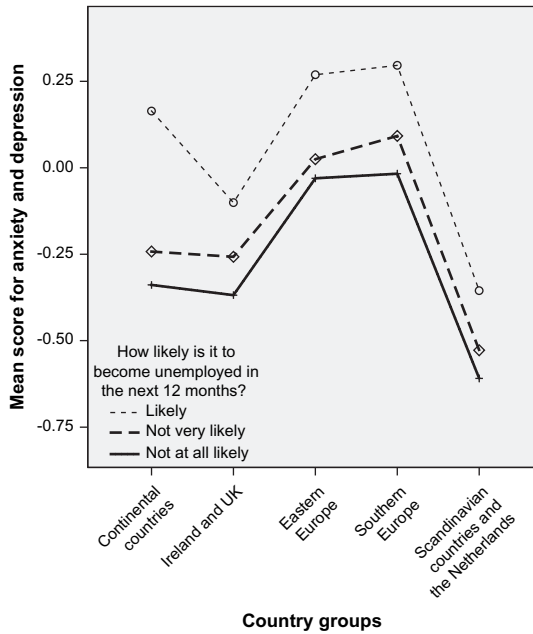


Figure 6. The combined effects of job insecurity and country clusters on anxiety/depression (source: ESS3).

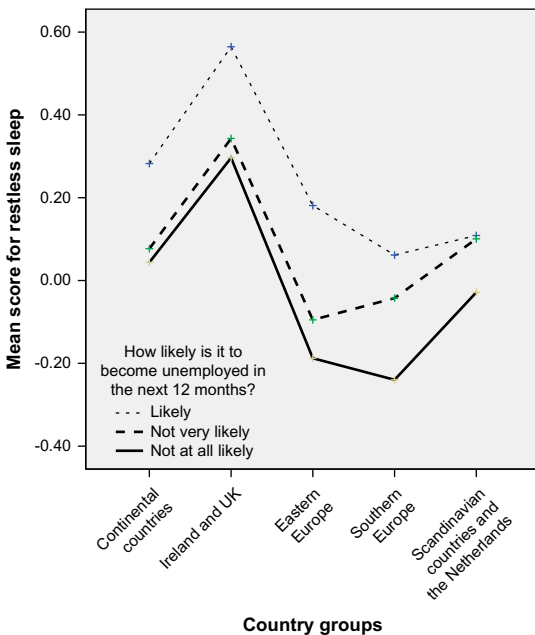


Figure 7. The combined effects of job insecurity and country clusters on sleep (source: ESS3).

between country groupings ($F(4, 12,012) = 46.6, p < 0.0005$). But the big question is whether the job insecurity effect varies between country groupings, or more specifically whether the gap has been reduced in the Nordic countries. There was little evidence of this, either visually from this graph or from the ANOVA ($F(2, 12,012) = 2.4, p = 0.012$). There was some narrowing of the gap for the Scandinavian and Netherlands group, but the effect was exceedingly weak (partial $\eta^2 = 0.002$) and on the borderline of significance even with a sample size of well over 10,000.

Since the absence of the moderating effect of flexicurity was surprising, a number of further ANOVAs were conducted with the ESS data to add in other variables that might have been masking the moderating effect. But even when gender, age, education, occupation, industry, contract and part-time/full-time were added into the model in turn, there was still no evidence whatsoever that some country groupings had managed to uncouple psychological well-being from job insecurity.

Discussion

The lack of evidence for the effectiveness of flexicurity policies to protect employee well-being from the effects of job insecurity is surprising, but a number of different analyses on two different data sets have failed to find the evidence that was sought. Apart from the stronger correlation between job insecurity and well-being in the case of Turkey, little or no other evidence was found of flexicurity as a moderator of this relationship. Firstly, some possible reasons for this will be suggested, before considering the implications of these findings for the flexicurity literature and flexicurity policies.

The psychological and economic mediators between job insecurity and psychological well-being were reviewed in the introduction to this paper. A consensus of these theories was that the financial aspects of employment are only one part of the reason why jobs (and, by extension, secure jobs) are so protective of psychological well-being. By this line of reasoning, flexicurity has only addressed one aspect of job loss, and therefore can only be, at

590 best, partially successful in removing the negative
effects of job insecurity. Other aspects of job loss,
such as the undermining of confidence and the loss
of valued colleagues, might be less tangible but
595 nevertheless just as challenging to psychological
well-being. Two quotes from the insecure male
respondents in Nolan's (2009) analysis illustrate
these more psychological aspects of job insecurity:

To have a reasonably stable situation at home,
that's the most important thing. A stable home
600 life and a stable situation and then obviously the
work is tied in because you can't do it without
money, really. (187).

I felt that, although I was still the father and the
husband at home, whilst I wasn't working, I
605 didn't feel that I was the provider ... I felt I
was letting them down.... My work provides
me with the wherewithal to give my family what
I believe they're entitled to. (187)

The interesting thing about these quotes is that
610 they both contain reference to money, but both also
show how money cannot be divorced from wider
aspects of these individual's lives. They do not just
require money to pay bills, but their provision of
money for the household is central to their identity
615 in their family lives. Thus, from these quotes (and
Nolan's (2002) analysis of the open-ended ques-
tions in a larger survey) it can be argued that the
economic security provided under flexicurity poli-
cies might only partially address insecure employ-
620 ees concerns about the possible loss of their jobs.
Other responses in Nolan (2002) more clearly em-
phasise that they feel job insecurity threatens their
self-esteem or that they particularly enjoy aspects of
their current job.

625 Furthermore, even without thinking to the future,
many accounts of day-to-day living in insecure jobs
hint at the non-economic costs of job insecurity. For
instance, some employees say they feel the need to
work longer hours, even though there might be less
630 work to do, because they think that by appearing to
be hard-working they will be perceived as indis-
pensable. Others state explicitly that they find it
difficult to work well when they are insecure or

state that job insecurity makes their jobs more
stressed or pressured. Furthermore, there have been
635 reports that, as employers downsize in times of re-
cession, providing good working conditions
becomes less of a priority to employers.

Flexicurity—an uncritical acceptance

The data presented in this paper provide a strong
critique of just one aspect of flexicurity policies.
640 One might expect that, given the centrality of flex-
icurity policies for EU policy since 2005, this one
attack might be a drop in the ocean compared to
a wealth of supporting evidence for the well-being
645 benefits of flexicurity. But, strangely, this is not the
case. There seems to be a complete vacuum in the
space where one would expect to see the rigorous
tests of the claims of the benefits of flexicurity for
psychological well-being. While there is no shortage
650 of discussions of flexicurity in policy debates, there
is a dearth of evidence to back up those claims.

Perhaps the reason for this premature and uncrit-
ical adoption of flexicurity is that it is politically
convenient for European employment policy. Anto-
655 niades (2008) argues that before the arrival of the
flexicurity model and debate, much after Cold War
employment policy debate at the EU level was char-
acterised by antagonism between competing An-
glo-Saxon and Continental camps, with little
660 possibility of arriving at a compromise between
two extremes. Whereas national governments have
political systems that permit a strong government to
lead decisively even when the voting public is split
evenly on an issue, the same is not true of the EU,
665 which relies on a high degree of consensus between
member states. Consequently, as long as arguments
were being played out along the old battle-lines of
the Anglo-Saxon model versus the Continental
model, the low road versus the high road to success
670 or promoting flexibility versus promoting security,
the institutions for determining employment policy
were in a stalemate. But, as Antoniadis argues, the
flexicurity model offered a way forward that was
not fundamentally at odds with either the Anglo-
675 Saxon or the Continental models, yet permitted
a clear European position that was distinct from
a US-type capitalism.

Such is the enthusiasm in the EU for flexicurity, documents are written in a way that, far from showing a healthy scepticism concerning the claims of flexicurity, the policies are promoted with an evangelical zeal, using terms like “Mission for Flexicurity” (Council of the European Union, 2008) using emphatic statements like “... flexicurity is without doubt the strategy that European labour markets must adopt in order to adapt to new requirements, ...”(4) and welcomed the fact that it had “increased its legitimacy” through the “participation of the European social partners” (5).

A problem with such a convenient political solution is that it is in danger of uncritical acceptance, without a careful analysis of the extent to which its claims are consistent with the evidence. Thus, the literature on flexicurity is not short on contributions that highlight its claimed advantages, but is short on attempts to test the specific claims that it makes regarding the benefits for the welfare of employees. This paper has analysed real data to explore the evidence for one of the claimed benefits of flexicurity policies and found it difficult to find support for that claim.

Of course, to fail to find something does not prove that it does not exist. It may be that this paper looks in the wrong place, or through the wrong lens. For instance, the spatial units utilised in the analyses were countries in the first sets of analyses and clusters of countries in the second set. But both of these units can be problematic, and different components of flexicurity models are set at different geographic units. For instance, some policies are set, albeit at an abstract level, at the level of the EU (perhaps explaining why Turkey is clearly separate in Figure 2?). Other relevant policies, such as labour law and EPL tend to be set at the national level, and training and other active labour market policies might have a high degree of regional autonomy. For instance, Scarpa (2009) argues that the Swedish and Finnish welfare systems show clear local variation, calling into question the main focus in the literatures on welfare regimes which is overwhelmingly at the national level. This is an example, perhaps typical of many sociological analyses that Lobao et al. (2008) argue, that would be better aimed at the

sub-national level, but this is rarely achieved in practice in sociological literatures. For the purposes of the present study, the existing data sets are limited by sample size for localised analyses, but some sub-national unit that achieves a compromise between sample size and territorial specificity just might provide the evidence that has eluded the analyses in this paper. And, if the data were available, a longitudinal dimension to these analyses, so that business cycles could be controlled for, would also be an improvement.

It is clear from this failure to find the support for this model, whatever the reason, that further empirical analyses to test this claimed benefit of flexicurity (and the other claimed benefits) are urgently needed to evaluate the desired benefits of this widely accepted set of policies. Until such policies are evaluated, the suggestion that flexicurity policies can succeed by exchanging poor job security for high employment security should be treated as an untested hypothesis rather than as the basis for EU employment policy. The flexicurity policy debates have provided a great opportunity for interdisciplinary social science researchers to evaluate and refine those policies, thereby contributing to dispassionate academic analysis and debate. Unfortunately, they have, on the whole, been slow to accept this challenge.

Endnotes

¹ Job insecurity measures typically provide highly skewed data, as only a minority of respondents are insecure or very insecure. To ensure that this skew does not cause statistical problems or artefacts, Spearman’s ρ non-parametric correlations are used for the EWCS4 data. In using the ESS3 data, the “very insecure” group are arguably too small to be treated as a separate group, so they have been recoded into the “insecure” batch for the ANOVAs and in the Figures 6 and 7.

² This category is for the non-employed and unemployed, which are not sampled in the EWCS. These were, of course, excluded from the analyses.

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[AQ6]

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