

# HOW DOES JOB INSECURITY AFFECT PERFORMANCE AND POLITICAL OUTCOMES? SOCIAL IDENTITY PLAYS A ROLE.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that job insecurity can threaten a person's identity as a member of the working population and increase similarity to unemployed people. This identity threat affects performance at work but also shifts political attitudes. This study brings first empirical evidence on how organizational events affect people's political behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

Insecure work is a root cause of a host of negative individual and organizational outcomes such as low well-being (e.g., De Witte, Pienaar, & De Cuyper, 2016), reduced job performance or high turnover intention (see Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). Workers in insecure jobs have even been given the blame for the recent rise of the political right by political commentators and analysts (e.g., Billet, 2016; Mughan, Bean, & McAllister, 2003). In short, there seems to be an implicit agreement that insecure jobs lay at the heart of individuals', organizations' and societies' ills. Empirical evidence for this presumption however is scarce. Are employment conditions really responsible for individual political attitudes? And how and through which mechanisms could uncertain jobs, organizational behavior as well as political attitudes be linked? This study applies social identity and its threat (Haslam, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Petriglieri, 2011) as the bridging link to connect job insecurity with inner and extra organizational outcomes. We propose that work can be understood as a social category that forms a critical part of a person's identity. Job insecurity – defined as the fear to lose one's employment and to become unemployed - might threaten a person's social identity as a member of the working population and thereby shift standards for behavior at work and attitudes outside work as well as provoke identity protective reactions. The present analysis specifically focuses on individual work performance and political attitudes, as indicated by a person's acceptance of group inequality and their self-identified political orientation.

While there is a deeply held assumption that precarious employment would lead to political right-wing attitudes, scholars so far remain strangely silent when it comes to investigating this link empirically and on an individual level. In times of increasingly blurred boundaries between work and non-work, where employment is embedded in so many aspects of a person's life, this appears short-sighted. By understanding work as an integral part of a person's identity, and job insecurity as a threat to that identity, a theoretically sound way to bridge work-related aspects and non-work related consequences is found. This does not only help

with understanding the wider consequences of work *outside* organizations, it can also offer fresh views on what happens *inside* organizations. Theoretically, our approach builds on a wealth of literature from two established research areas: job insecurity and research on identities and identity threat (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) and integrates it with work on political attitudes (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

### **Insecure work as a form of identity threat**

If work is part of who we are, then a threat to the work situation is going to affect that aspect of our identity. According to classic social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), most part of a person's identity is made of their social group memberships: 'Who someone is' depends on the social groups a person perceives her/himself to be part of. These social category memberships not only provide information about a person's place in a wider social context, they also serve as a source for attitudes and values and guide evaluations and behavior.

Management research is no stranger to social identity explanations. Research and publications on the topic of identity at work have grown exponentially over the last two decades, as reflected in the number of excellent reviews available (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008; Brown, 2015; Haslam 2004; Miscenko & Day, 2016). It is only very recently though, that social identity has been used as a lens to look at threats to the employment status itself. Selenko, Mäkikangas and Stride (2017) argue that employment could be understood as a social category that forms part of a person's social identity. Just like other social identity categories, employment can function as a system of orientation to "...define the individual's place in society" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 15-16) and deliver an answer to the question 'who one is'. Employment is very important to people, it not only provides a financial income but fulfils many essential functions for the individual (see e.g. Jahoda, 1982). It will be especially important in contexts where it is not taken for granted.

Job insecurity is commonly defined as "...an overall concern about the continued existence of the job in the future" (e.g., De Witte, 1999, p. 156; Rosenblatt & Ruvio, 1996; Sverke, Hellgren & Näswall, 2002). When understanding employment as essential identity category, job insecurity poses a threat to that aspect of a person's identity, as it indicates "potential harm to the [...] enactment of an identity" (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644). Given that employment is most essential, a threat is likely to be noticed and attended to. People will become more aware that they are still employed in the context of an employment threat. At the same time they will feel less prototypical for the group of the employed and the working population (because they are almost unemployed). Moreover, job insecurity will pose a threat to a person's identity by 'pushing' people towards an unwanted group, the group of unemployed people. In other words, although people will want to stay employed and to avoid becoming part of the unemployed group, job insecurity will weaken their identification with the working population and make them more similar to the unemployed.

### **Performance and political consequences of identity threat**

This threat to identity will affect people in several ways. Firstly, there will be a direct effect, as identity serves as an orientation for attitudes and behavior. Secondly, an identity threat might provoke certain coping reactions to manage threatened identity. In line with the

assumptions of self-categorization theory that identity functions as a guideline, we expect that people who feel peripheral to group of employed people and more similar to the group of unemployed people might be less inclined to follow the prototypical norms of the group of employed people, such as e.g. 'working hard' (Furnham, 1984). Furthermore, understanding a threat to an identity as a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Petriglieri, 2011), we presume that this will limit a person's capacity to deal with everyday issues in the job. Selenko et al (2017) found support for this in a previous study; people who were threatened in their identity as a member of the working population also reported to invest less effort at work.

Aside from in-work consequences, identity threat is also going to affect political attitudes *outside* work. We presume that a person's identity as a member of the working population will serve as a point of reference for attitudes associated with employment more generally, even if they are not presently 'at work'. Talk about 'creating jobs' and 'securing employment' feature prominently in political programs and electoral campaigns (for recent media coverage see Shear & Davies, 2016). In situations of job insecurity, people will be more alert towards such topics, as they are relevant to their (threatened and alerted) identity as members of the working population. In other words, talk about job creation (irrespective of the political connotation) will "speak" more to job insecure persons. How can that threatened identity now be linked to the endorsement of political values?

Building on the 'identity as a cognitive orientation' argument, we predict that threatened identity will lead to *less* political conservatism. People who identify less with the group of working people will be less inclined to align themselves with typical meritocratic values, prototypically associated with work (Furnham, 1984). Meritocratic values go hand in hand with a certain acceptance of inequality (as long as the inequality is justified in an equitable way), which is associated with political conservatism and social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1993). In short, people who identify less as working people, will hence be less likely in favor for group inequality and be less attracted by political conservatism.

Furthermore, feeling similarity to unemployed people will also change attitudes towards group equality, as identifying with a (generally) negatively evaluated group will alter people's attitudes towards that group. When identifying with a social category, people not only use this group as a part of cognitive representation of themselves, the group actually *becomes* part of themselves (Dury, Cocking & Reicher, 2009). This affects the efforts aimed towards helping that group. More identification with unemployed people is hence likely to lead to more favorable attitudes towards group equality and less acceptance of group inequality (Jost et al, 2003). This leads to the following hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 1. People who are in more insecure jobs will feel less identification with the working population and more identification with unemployed people.*

*Hypothesis 2. More identification with the working population will be connected with more performance, more acceptance of group inequality and a self-identification as politically more to the right.*

*Hypothesis 3. More identification with the unemployed people will be negatively connected with performance, less acceptance of group inequality and a self-identification as politically more to the left.*

## METHOD

To investigate the hypotheses a longitudinal survey study is carried out. A sample of 1.000 British workers in various professions are surveyed on their working conditions, their identification (with the working population and with unemployed) as well as their work behavior and political attitudes over four waves. The presented analysis concentrates on wave 1 (T1, June 2016) and wave 2 (T2, October 2016). At T2, 632 people of the original sample participated again. Only the data of these participants, who participated twice in this study will be regarded in the present analysis. The majority of the respondents (59.5%) were male, on average 44.98 years old ( $SD = 11.13$ ), most (70.6%) were in a relationship and did not have any children living with them (68.5%). As for their education, only 13 (2.1%) had not finished any education, 20.7% had finished their GCSE's (usually at the age of 16), 18.0% also had their A-levels (requirement for a place at university), 19.9% finished a technical or professional education, 24.6% held a bachelor's degree, and 13.3% held a postgraduate degree. For further analysis this variable was dummy coded, having a postgraduate degree served as the comparison category. Respondents worked in various professions, 51.9% worked in blue collar professions. All respondents were employed, most worked in a permanent position (81%), and held only one job (90%). They worked on average 34.81 hrs. per week ( $SD = 11.21$ ).

### Measures

*Job insecurity.* To assess perceived job insecurity we used the 4 item scale by Van der Elst, De Witte and De Cuyper (2014). Respondents had to indicate on a 5-point scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements like "Chances are I will soon lose my job." The reliability of the scale was good at both measurement times ( $\alpha_{T1} = .90$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .86$ ).

*Social identification with the working population.* Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears' (1995) four item social identity scale as described by Selenko et al (2017), was adapted to measure this variable. Respondents had to indicate on a 7-point response coding how strongly they disagreed or agreed with four statements, for example "I see myself as a part of the working population" ( $\alpha_{T1} = .88$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .90$ ).

*Social identification with unemployed persons.* This was measured with a combined scale adapted from Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal & Penna (2005) and Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999). Respondents had to disagree/agree on a 7-point measurement scale to the following items: "I identify with unemployed people", "I feel solidarity with people who are unemployed" and "I am like people who are unemployed" ( $\alpha_{T1} = .88$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .88$ ).

*Performance.* To measure performance we used a scale developed by De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, Jegers and Van Acker (2009). Respondents had to indicate their agreement to three items on a 5-point Likert scale, for example "I do not give up quickly if something does not work well" ( $\alpha_{T1} = .79$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .83$ ).

*Political attitudes.* The political attitudes of the respondents were measured in two ways. *Acceptance of group inequality* was assessed with the 4 item anti-egalitarianism subscale of the social dominance scale by Ho et al (2015). Items were modified by including "our society" into their wording and coded so that high ratings on a 5-point scale indicated more acceptance or group inequality. An explorative factor analysis revealed that this scale comprised of two factors. The first factor consisted of "Group equality should not be our primary goal in our society" and "It is unjust to try to make groups equal in our society" ( $\alpha_{T1} = .64$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .70$ ). The second factor

comprised of “We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups in our society” and “We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed in our society” ( $\alpha_{T1} = .86$ ,  $\alpha_{T2} = .85$ ). The factors correlated only moderately with each other ( $r_{T1} = .44$ ;  $r_{T2} = .32$ ), thereby indicating their independence. In addition, participants were asked to self-rate their *political orientation* on a scale ranging from 1 (left wing) to 10 (right wing).

## RESULTS

First of all, the overall fit of the model and temporal measurement invariance of the hypothesized 6-factor measurement model for job insecurity, social identification with the working population, social identification with the unemployed, performance, and the three indicators of political attitudes (political orientation and the two factors of acceptance of group inequality) was established. All items were allowed to load on their repeated measurement at the second time point and all factors were allowed to correlate with each other. The 6-factors at each wave model fitted the data satisfactorily,  $\chi^2 = 1049.005$ ,  $df = 510$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , CFI = 0.962, TLI = 0.953, RMSEA = 0.041, SRMR = 0.047, (Hu & Bentler, 1999). It also significantly fits better than both a competing 5-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 371.089$ ,  $\Delta df = 21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a one factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 7176.886$ ,  $\Delta df = 58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore the 6-factor model displayed scalar measurement invariance across time, with model fit not getting significantly worse by fixing the factor loadings equal across waves ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 20.816$ ,  $\Delta df = 12$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and by fixing the intercepts ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 14.201$ ,  $\Delta df = 12$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

### Testing the hypotheses

To test our hypothesis we adapted the scalar invariance version of the measurement model by adding control variables, the observed political orientation variable, and the hypothesized causal paths. This produced a satisfactorily fitting model ( $\chi^2 = 1305.295$ ,  $df = 634$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , CFI = 0.955, TLI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.041, SRMR = 0.050). An inspection of the individual path coefficients revealed that, as hypothesized, there was a significant negative effect of job insecurity at T1 on the identification with the working population at T2,  $B = -0.059$ ,  $SEB = 0.028$ ,  $p = .035$  and a marginally positive effect on the identification with unemployed people,  $B = 0.096$ ,  $SEB = 0.050$ ,  $p = .054$ , which is in line with the prediction of H1. Moreover, identification with the working population at T1 was related to more performance at T2,  $B = 0.097$ ,  $SEB = 0.032$ ,  $p = .002$ ; it was however not related to the acceptance of inequality (both factors) nor with political orientation, thereby only partially supporting H2.

Identification with the unemployed people seemed not to matter for performance, but was negatively related to the first factor of the acceptance of inequality measure at T2 (consisting of the items “Group equality should not be our primary goal in our society” and “It is unjust to try to make groups equal in our society”),  $B = -0.058$ ,  $SEB = 0.18$ ,  $p = .001$  and to political orientation,  $B = -0.076$ ,  $SEB = 0.038$ ,  $p = .044$ , indicating a more left wing orientation, which partially supported H3. There was also a direct effect of job insecurity on self-reported political orientation - job insecurity was directly related to *more rightwing* political orientations,  $B = 0.122$ ,  $SEB = 0.059$ ,  $p = .037$ .

We estimated a hypothetical indirect effect (presuming that the relationship between T1 and T2 would be equal to subsequent relationships between T2 and T3) (see Cole & Maxwell, 2003). For this estimate, a significance test does not make sense and the results need to be treated

as explorative only. Job insecurity had a negative indirect effect via identification with unemployed people on acceptance of inequality ( $B = -.006$ ,  $SEB = .004$ ), as well as on political orientation ( $B = -.007$ ,  $SEB = .005$ ) and a negative indirect effect via identification with the working population on performance at work ( $B = -.006$ ,  $SEB = .003$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The presented study builds a bridge between job insecurity and behavior at and outside work by proposing that job insecurity poses a threat to important elements of a person's identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987; Petriglieri, 2011). Specifically, we propose that job insecurity would threaten a person's identity as a member of the working population and simultaneously enhance their identification with unemployed people. These two aspects together would affect work performance and also political attitudes. We thereby test the deep seated assumption that employment conditions affect political behavior. Results of a longitudinal quantitative study indeed verify the effect job insecurity has on a change of identity – more job insecurity leading to less social identification with the working population and more identification with the unemployed people at a later time point. This shows that job insecurity is indeed a threat to the identity as a working person. It also shows that job insecurity affects different aspects of 'who we are' in different ways. This complexity is further underlined by the consequences of identity threat. While identification with the working population was a predictor of performance, identification with the unemployed was primarily relevant for the political attitudes outside the workplace. This indicates the importance of looking at multiple identities – they appear to be responsible for different outcomes.

For organizations, these results show that job insecurity certainly does not have a motivational value, as it is related to less performance. The feeling of not being properly part of the working population, affects how much effort people are willing to expend at work. Beyond that, there are also important political conclusions to be drawn. We found that identification with the unemployed was associated with less acceptance of group inequality and a shift in self-declared political orientation more to the left. At the same time there was also a direct effect of job insecurity leading to a shift in self-declared political orientation more to the right. Apparently, job insecurity leads (directly and indirectly) to more extreme political views, to both the left *and* the right. More research would be needed to identify the conditions for these specific shifts. Certainly, there are a few limitations to this study: There is the issue of the two wave design – which does not allow to test the proposed indirect effect. Then there is the issue of self-report measures, often self-declared performance and political orientation differ from what people really do.

Still we hope to have offered a convincing illustration of how job insecurity can be understood as a threat to a person's identity and through that affects inner and extra organizational behavior. Work is a substantial part of who we are, and as we can show, job insecurity poses a serious threat to that part of our identity. This might have widespread effects – even on political attitudes that span beyond the work place.

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS