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Comparative Evaluations of Performance and Self-esteem as Determinants of Job Insecurity

Maria Daniela Postelnicu¹

Oana Maria Grigore²

¹Korn Ferry Hay Group, ²University of Bucharest, Department of Psychology

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Corresponding author at: Magheru One, Magheru Avenue, no.1-3, floor 2, Bucharest.

E-mail address: postelnicu.maria@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Job insecurity is a toxic stressor brought forward by the world's financial crisis. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that comparative judgements predict a unique percentage of job insecurity's variance, above self esteem. Subsequently, questionnaires were applied via social media or via paper-pencil to 108 participants. Hierarchical regression results show that comparative judgements do not have any incremental effect in predicting job insecurity above self esteem. Self esteem predicts 21% variance in job insecurity. In conclusion, job insecurity is predicted by how individuals globally evaluate themselves, with comparative judgements regarding one's own performance or the company's performance having no incremental predictive power. These two variables can be regarded as undifferentiated from self esteem.

Keywords: *job insecurity, self-esteem, comparative judgements, incremental effect*

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of this study is job insecurity or uncertainty (terms that will be used interchangeably throughout this paper) and the relations that are established with psychological variables such as self-esteem and comparative evaluations of performance. Thus, the goal was to demonstrate that self-esteem and comparative evaluations of performance correlate and predict job insecurity, the comparative evaluations are expected to predict an unique percentage of the variance of job insecurity.

Job insecurity is a stressor brought to the fore by the worldwide financial crisis and, generally, by the national and worldwide fluctuations of the social and economical condition. However, as the impact of the economic crisis has dimmed as well as the major threats to job stability, the focus is shifting to the way that uncertainty affects the individual outside the crisis, especially knowing that job insecurity was established by the "European Agency for Safety & Health at Work" as one of the main stress factors in Europe since 2007 (Sora, Caballer & Peiro, 2014).

Mainly, it is important to focus on the psychological predictors of job insecurity, in the current, relatively stable, socio-economic context, in order to have a clear and exhaustive picture of the relations established by this stressor with other variables, taking into consideration the multitude of studies focused on major predictors that take into account the state of economic crisis and its concrete consequences (Sora, Caballer & Peiro, 2014), labor market inequalities, market economy dynamics.

Previous research (Sora, Caballer & Peiro, 2014) highlighted a series of job insecurity determinants, placing them in the context of the economic crisis. For example, the employability is a determinant of job insecurity, which implies that a better rated employee will be more likely to keep his or hers job which leads to lower levels of job insecurity. The world has emerged from the crisis, thus not only the objective situation that could create a climate of insecurity was taken into consideration as a psychological determinant of insecurity (Sora, Caballer & Peiro, 2014), but also the self-assessment of performance and the performance of the employer company at a time when the major threats to the job are fewer.

It is a necessary contribution to a field that contributes to the research of psychological aspects which determine the apparition of job insecurity, aspects that were almost neglected for various reasons in specialty literature and that might lead to the development of specific intervention programs.

Self-esteem and job insecurity

When it comes to self-assessment, self-esteem is, of course, an important variable. Self-esteem represents by itself a central assessment of self and it also determines to a certain extent other types of specific evaluation (Kinnunen, Feldt & Mauno, 2003).

Self-esteem is an important psychological construct because it is central to the daily experience of the individual; it refers to the way people feel about themselves which reflects and affects their permanent informational exchanges with the environment and other people (Kernis, 2003).

There are many approaches to self-esteem, but the one thing that is constant in all of the definitions is the fact that people have a general feeling of self value which influences psychological functioning. Self-esteem is frequently related to high levels of optimism and happiness and low levels of depression and negative emotions. However, self-esteem has a negative connotation when it is excessive. In this situation it is associated with dysfunctional behavior of negative feedback rejection, of anger and aggressivity oriented towards anything that threatens the self image of the individual, of engaging in social comparison actions that support prejudice and discrimination against others (Neff & Vonk, 2008).

In relation to job insecurity or other types of stressors, self-esteem is a powerful moderator of the relationship between the determinants of job insecurity and the one of it and its consequences (Peng, Xie & Schaubroek, 2015; Kinnunen, Feldt & Mauno, 2003; Hui & Lee, 2000). It is considered that self-esteem acts as a isolation factor of employees from the tendency to interpret the job's stressors negatively and as a supporting factor, offering coping alternatives (LeRouge et al., 2006).

According to Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources there are personal resources that soften the effects of anticipation regarding the loss of resources, one of them being self-efficacy. Self-efficacy determines how much effort it takes for the individual to confront obstacles, this also applies to job insecurity, therefore, individuals with higher self-efficacy are less affected by this stressor; likewise self-efficacy works like a „sponge“ in the relation between job insecurity and performance (Konig, et al., 2010). Studies show that it also plays a buffer role (extenuating) in the relation between job insecurity and its other consequences on the individual (Schreurs et al., 2010; Konig et al, 2010). Negative emotionality (which includes low self-esteem, among other things) correlates positively with the harmful effects of job insecurity and it might also intensify the

connection between the stressor and the level of stress which is produced, in a theoretical framework focused on the homonym model (Mak & Mueller, 2000). Positive emotionality, associated with high self-esteem, has as much impact on stress as the negative one, but in the opposite direction, promoting psychological health (Roskies, Louis-Guerin & Fournier, 1993).

Therefore, we consider that:

H1: The level of self-esteem is related with the level of job insecurity.

Comparative evaluations regarding performance

The process of self comparison with other people is a fundamental aspect of human life which helps in the course of reducing uncertainty and generating meaning. Actually, social comparison is an inevitable process in everyday social interactions (Brown, Ferris, Heller & Keeping, 2007).

In reference to comparative evaluations regarding performance, there are two ways to look at performance: one of them is based on the comparison of personal performance in different moments and the other one is based on the comparison with others (Van Yperen & Leander, 2014). The theory of social comparison talks about the way that people build their self image through comparing themselves to other people with a better or worse performance. The extent to which individuals see themselves as or different from the target individuals with whom they compare themselves has effects in terms of emotionality (emotional states) and effects on the self-evaluation process (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

In an organizational context, comparative evaluations of self-performance are made through comparing someone's own activity and results with the ones of others. Thus, a hierarchy is created in the mind of the individual, a hierarchy in which he is either among the first places, in the middle or at the end. The positioning in any of this places may have consequences on how the individual assesses their chances of remaining in the company or organization they work in.

The hypothesis according to which the social comparison processes and concerns about their fairness affect the labor market has a long history, dates back to Marshall (1890), Slichter (1920) and Hicks (1932) and practitioners like William H. Davis, the manager of National War Labor Board from 1942 to 1946 were also convinced that unjustified salary inequalities in a company cause „break down morale, create individual dissatisfaction, encourage absenteeism and hamper production“ (Cohn, Fehr, Hermann & Schneider, 2011).

In an organizational context, the frequency with which individuals produce upward social comparisons is predicted by the ambiguity of the role (unclear expectations from one's position), the autonomy level of the task and the core self evaluations. Mainly, the need of self-improvement and reduction of uncertainty boosts upward social comparisons and the need of personal development boosts downward social comparisons. The consequences of upward social comparisons reflect in lower levels of job satisfaction and commitment to the organization, the effect being exactly the opposite in the case of downward comparisons (Brown et. al, 2007). Social comparison processes can affect a company's internal structure, the mood of employees, and therefore the company's work requirements, company boundaries and the ability to change salary for more employees, wage changes over time, and even unemployment rates (Fehr, Herrmann & Schneider, 2011).

The process of social comparison are deeply fixed in the structure of the organizational life. For example, social comparison appears in planned actions, like the ones in which the supervisor evaluates his subordinates in relation with each other, but it also appears naturally, an example being when an employee finds out by mistake what salary he has compared to his colleagues.

Although they are inherent to any social interaction, comparison processes are built around six themes of interest: (1) organizational justice, (2) performance evaluation, (3) virtual work environments, (4) affective behavior at work, (5) stress and (6) leadership.

H2: Comparative evaluations regarding own performances, and also the performance of the employing company correlates with the level of job insecurity.

In conclusion, job insecurity was studied in relation to many variables, both objective (external) and subjective (involving the employee). Job insecurity has both an objective component (external conditions, objectives that threaten the continuity of activity: restructuring, layoffs etc.), and a subjective one, for the cognitive assessment of the objective situation (which takes into account the probability of losing the job and the severity of the consequences of this loss) (Klandermans, Hesselink & van Vuuren, 2010). Thus, any factor that influences the subjective perception of probability or severity of losing the job influences the level of insecurity experienced by the employee. According to this mechanism, and also to the known conclusions about the predictors and determinants of job insecurity, we suggest that subjective perception, regarding the employee's own performance and the performance of the employer company, has an impact on the experience of insecurity of the workplace. Knowing that self-esteem is a personal resource and that it diminishes

the effect of some variables on job insecurity, this study started from the question:

Q1: Are the comparative evaluations made by people about performance predictors of job insecurity while having an increment to self-esteem?

Figure 1. Study model

2. METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

The sample consists of 103 employees, men ($n=35$) and women ($n=68$) aged between 16 and 57 ($M=31.67, SD=4.61$). The questionnaires were distributed through social media, with the indication that they are addressed to people who have a job, but also in pencil-paper format to people who work and who were able to pass them on to their colleagues. Therefore, a „snowball“ type of sample was used.

Instruments

Job insecurity. The study concerns job insecurity and it used the Job Insecurity Scale developed by De Witte (De Witte, 2000) consisting of 4 items ranked on Likert scale from 1 to 4, where 1 means "total disagreement" and 4 "total agreement" (3 of them are scored normally and one is reversed). An item example is "There is a risk of losing

my job in the near future". This scale is a global measure for job insecurity, validated in 5 European countries, with coefficients of internal consistency ranging from .82 to .88 (Elst, de Witte & de Cuyper, 2014).

Self-esteem. For self-esteem the „Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale“ was used, containing of 10 items ranked on Likert scale from 1 to 4, where 1 means "total disagreement" and 4 "total agreement". The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale is the most used method of measurement of self-esteem, validated in previous studies, see Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991 (cited in Kinnunen, Feldt & Mauno, 2003).

Comparative evaluations regarding performance. For this variable we used our own 2 items: „When it comes to performance at the workplace, where do you see yourself compared to your colleagues on a scale of 1 to 10?“, and „On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you place the company you work in, compared to other competitive companies on the market?“. Here the variants of response are distributed on a continuum from 1 to 10, where 1 means "worst performance" and 10, "best performance".

3. RESULTS

We applied hierarchical multiple regression analysis, bringing self-esteem first into the equation and then the comparative evaluations to highlight the contribution of each predictor (and if it exists for the variable comparative evaluations) and then to test if the contribution of the

predictor comparative evaluations is bigger than the one of self-esteem, as we were expecting.

Table 1 shows the relation between variables. As you can see, the level of self-esteem correlates negatively with the one of job insecurity, at $r=-.46$, supporting the first

hypothesis. Furthermore, the two types of comparative evaluations correlate only to $r = -.01$ (comparative evaluation regarding personal performance) and to $r = -.04$

(comparative evaluations regarding the performance the company) with the level of job insecurity. This fact does not support the second hypothesis.

Table 1. *Correlations between variables*

	Gender	Age	The level of self-esteem	Comparative evaluations regarding personal performance	Comparative evaluations regarding the performance of the company
The level of job insecurity	-.02	.08	-.46	-.01	-.04
Gender		.06	.20	.11	.02
Age			.14	.02	.06
The level of self-esteem				.19	.21
Comparative evaluations regarding personal performance					.46

Self-esteem predicts by itself 21% of the level of job insecurity ($R^2=.21$, $\beta=.46$, $t=-5.23$, $p<0.05$).

Age predicts job insecurity to a smaller extent ($R^2=.008$, $\beta=.087$, $t=.87$, $p>0.05$). The same result is noticed in the case of gender ($R^2=.001$, $\beta=-.02$, $t=-.23$, $p>0.05$).

Comparative evaluations regarding personal performance do not predict job insecurity ($R^2=.00$, $\beta=-.01$, $t=-.096$, $p>0.05$), and neither do comparative evaluations regarding the performance the company compared to other competitive companies on the market ($R^2=.002$, $\beta=-.04$, $t=-.47$, $p>0.05$).

Table 2. *The coefficients of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis for the 4 blocks of variables*

	R	R ²	R ² adjusted	R ² adjusted	F	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.02 ^a	.00	-.00	.001	.05	1	101	.81
2	.09 ^b	.00	-.01	.008	.78	1	100	.37
3	.49 ^c	.24	.21	.23	30.47	1	99	.00
4	.49 ^d	.24	.20	.006	.39	2	97	.67

Note. ^aGender. ^bGender, Age. ^cGender, Age, Self-esteem. ^dGender, Age, Self-esteem, Comparative evaluations regarding personal performance, Comparative evaluations regarding the performance of the company compared to other competitive companies on the market.

Table 2 shows the regression coefficients for the four blocks of variables entered. We can notice that self-

esteem, along with other demographic variables, have the biggest regression coefficient $R=.49$, predicting 23% of the variance of job insecurity, at a $p < 0.05$ threshold of

statistical significance. Gender and age predict job insecurity to a smaller extent (0.08%), without reaching the threshold of statistical significance, results which are not supported by

the specialty literature, which indicates that age and gender are determinants of job insecurity.

Finally, the coefficient of regression for the first block, which also incorporates the comparative evaluations is $R=.498$. This coefficient by itself is not of statistical

significance compared to self-esteem, having a prediction increment (R^2 adjusted=.06, $\beta=.06$, for the comparative evaluations regarding personal performance and $\beta=.025$ for the comparative evaluations regarding the performance the company compared to other competitive companies on the market) of only 0.06% over self-esteem and the demographic variables, without reaching the threshold of statistical significance ($p>0.05$). This fact shows that they are not by themselves differentiated from self-esteem.

Table 3. *Standardized and non-standardized coefficients β for the 3 blocks of variables*

		β	T	Sig.
1	Gender	-.02	-.23	.81
2	Gender	-.02	-.28	.77
	Age	.08	.88	.37
	Gender	.06	.74	.45
3	Age	.15	1.74	.08
	Self-esteem	-.49	-5.52	.00
	Gender	.06	.68	.49
	Age	.15	1.72	.08
	Self-esteem	-.51	-5.52	.00
	Comparative evaluations regarding personal performance	.06	.66	.51
4	Comparative evaluations regarding the performance of the company	.02	.24	.80

4. DISCUSSION

We begin from the assumption that, in the absence of a social and economical situation threatening job stability, job insecurity is predicted by psychological variables, such as self-esteem and comparative assessments regarding performance. Being evaluations of objective situations, it was expected that there would be an increase in their prediction power of job insecurity over self-esteem.

In terms of demographic variables, their correlations and predictive power for job insecurity are poor. Neither gender nor age impact job insecurity. This data is inconsistent with some of the information in the literature that shows that age and gender are not only determinants of job insecurity, but also mediators between insecurity and its negative consequences. A possible explanation for our data is the

fact that the size of the sample did not allow the detection of an effect, especially given the discrepancy between the number of women and men in the sample. It is possible that, because in this study the number of women was larger than the number of men the regression coefficients and correlations were affected by the fact that men may be inclined to feel job insecurity more strongly than women, but the effect was not recorded.

This result, as it is, implies that there are no groups more vulnerable to experience job insecurity in terms of age or gender. However, in literature, for example, the older age is considered to be a risk factor for job insecurity. The context of measurement, however, differs. In literature job insecurity is addressed in the context of social and

economic crisis or during a restructuring processes where old age may be a risk factor on the basis of utilitarian reasoning to invest in the youngest who will be able to work for a longer period, thus eventually depreciating the employer's investment. In the absence of such a context, it seems that neither age nor gender have an impact on job insecurity. Also, it is possible that the lack of the expected effects is caused by the fact that not all the possible moderator variables were taken into account, variables such as social policies or the number of employees in the household may affect the threat of job insecurity.

As in literature, self-esteem has significant correlation and regression coefficients.

Self-esteem is obviously an important psychological predictor of job insecurity. It is understandable that when an employee devalues himself this automatically leads to the devaluation of his / her own performance in relation to the other colleagues. Also, the items in the Rosenberg scale are made to express judgments about any aspect of the self, being a global measure of self-esteem. For example, the item „I feel like I can do all kinds of things as well as others“ can refer to any aspect of life, including the workplace. Thus, it is justified that self-esteem affects comparative assessments of personal performance.

Interestingly, comparative evaluations regarding the performance the company compared to other competitive companies on the market have a slightly stronger relation to job insecurity, which is hard to explain in terms previously formulated. The overall assessment of one's own person can influence the assessment of their own performance, but when it influences the evaluation of the firm's performance on the market, the mechanism becomes less intuitive. The fact that self-esteem is strongly related (among others) to negative or positive emotionality and neuroticism (Neiss, Stevenson, Legrand, Iacono & Sedikides, 2009) may determine the individual to look at the circumstances with more optimism or in a more positive way when he/she has a higher level of self-esteem (also positive emotionality and emotional stability) and in reverse at lower levels of self-esteem, accompanied by negative emotionality and emotional instability; all of this knowing that emotionality and neuroticism influence the perception of life.

Self-esteem predicts about 21% of job insecurity. The explanation is that if the individual evaluates himself positively then he will also evaluate the odds of keeping his job more positive (here we assume that self-esteem has a direct effect on job insecurity) or will assess himself as suitable for employment in other positions (here we assume a mediating effect of employability).

Comparative evaluations don't relate to the level of job insecurity, result which does not support the second hypothesis. The level of job insecurity does not change depending on the variation of these two variables. The lack of correlation can be explained by the fact that the two variables are concepts that match self-esteem, and when we test the relation between self-esteem and job insecurity the connection between the concepts that form self-esteem and insecurity is lost. Also, we notice the lack of predictive power when we refer to the relation between comparative evaluations and job insecurity, which can be explained by the same phenomenon of overlapping variables. Namely, they do not predict anything in addition to self-esteem, they do not have an unique contribution to predicting the variability of job insecurity, being conceptually and empirically subsumed to self-esteem.

In this context, the question is, of course, also invalidated by empirical data (H3: Comparative evaluations have an increase in the prediction of job insecurity over self-esteem.).

Thus, the results show that job insecurity is predicted, at a psychological level, by the way that the individual evaluates himself, the comparative evaluations of personal performance and of the performance of the company do not have predictive power over self-esteem. An explanation would be that these, as specific evaluations, are influenced by how the individual assesses himself, being, in the present case, undifferentiated processes from self-esteem, even if they refer to objective situations. However, the correlations between self-esteem and comparative evaluations are not very high, which means that there are other variables that affect the evaluation process of personal performance and the performance of the company.

In practice, the discussed results indicate that in an economically and socially stable situation, job insecurity is still manifesting, and there is a vulnerable group of individuals who, due to the subjective way in which they assess themselves, are prone to greater expression of job insecurity, but especially if the social and economic situation would change. They are more sensitive to the threat of job insecurity and therefore, in an unstable society, with fluctuations and disruptions in the social and economic sphere, are more vulnerable. It is recommended for the employers to be cautious and attentive at the level of self-esteem of their employees by trying to optimize it as a means of prevention and optimization, especially as it is known that self-esteem is a personal resource that predicts other important consequences in the organizational environment.

Limits and future directions

One of the limitations is the fact that the design of the study is cross-sectional, which does not allow causality to be inferred.

Another limitation is the non-probabilistic sampling method that prevented obtaining a representative sample for the target population. Non-probabilistic sampling can lead to measurement errors by the very fact that individuals who offer to fill in questionnaires are those who use social media and may be employed in a particular company, they also might have personality traits or levels of motivation and reasons that interfere with the variables of the study. Also, due to the sampling method, some effects may be distorted because we do not know the situation of the participants at their workplace, the firms of some respondents might be in restructuring or mergers, so the level of job insecurity for them is a consequence of an objective situation and not of their subjective evaluations.

The exclusive use of "self-report" measurement methods is another limitation of the study, some of the correlation

values could be distorted. The error might be caused by the common method of measurement; this refers to the variance resulting from the tendency of the participants to respond similarly to certain items, from the structure of items that predispose to a certain type of response, from similarities in the test conditions (Podsakoff, MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012).

As a future research direction, a suggestion would be testing the employability hypothesis as a mediator of the relationship between self-esteem and job insecurity, a configuration that would explain a mechanism by which self-esteem reduces the threat of job insecurity (by convincing the individual that he/she is suitable for hiring).

Also, the ways in which self-esteem influences job insecurity indirectly through the mediation effect of other variables, as well as through testing the mediation of comparative evaluations are left to be explored; employability has been mentioned above as a variable that explains why the employee does not feel job insecurity.

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