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UNCERTAIN TIMES, UNCERTAIN JOBS, DEPLETED WORKERS: BURNOUT AS A LINK BETWEEN JOB INSECURITY AND WELL-BEING

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Abstract

Job insecurity represents a salient job demand in contemporary work contexts and has been consistently linked to reduced employee well-being. However, less is known about the mechanisms through which job insecurity translates into impaired well-being. Drawing on occupational stress and Job Demands–Resources perspectives, the present study examined whether burnout, conceptualized as exhaustion and disengagement, explains the association between job insecurity and employee well-being. Data were collected in autumn 2022 in Montenegro, during a period of heightened uncertainty related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 275 employees participated in the study. The questionnaire included the Job Insecurity Scale, the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (exhaustion and disengagement), the WHO-5 Well-Being Index, and a set of questions about demographic variables. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among variables while controlling for gender, age, overall work experience, and organizational ownership. Results showed that the overall model was significant, explaining 38.9% of the variance in well-being, $R^2 = .39$, $F(3, 193) = 40.94$, $p < .001$. Exhaustion ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) and job insecurity ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$) were significant negative predictors of well-being, whereas disengagement was not ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .075$). Mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4) indicated that job insecurity significantly predicted exhaustion ($B = 0.27$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 7.25$, $p < .001$), which in turn predicted lower well-being ($B = -0.72$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -7.31$, $p < .001$). The total effect of job insecurity on well-being was significant ($B = -0.45$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), while the direct effect remained significant but was reduced when exhaustion was included ($B = -0.26$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. Bootstrap analysis (5,000 samples) confirmed a significant indirect and partial effect of job insecurity on well-being via exhaustion ($B = -0.19$, Boot$SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [−0.28, −0.12]). These findings support the health-impairment process proposed by the JD–R model and highlight exhaustion as a key mechanism through which job insecurity undermines employee well-being.

Keywords: *Job insecurity, burnout, exhaustion, disengagement, employee well-being.*

1. Introduction

Job insecurity represents a salient job demand in contemporary work contexts and has been consistently associated with reduced employee well-being (De Witte, 1999; De Witte et al., 2016; Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). However, the underlying mechanisms through which it translates into impaired well-being remain poorly understood. To explain these mechanisms, the present study draws on the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, which conceptualizes job demands as drivers of strain through a health-impairment process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001).

The importance of examining job insecurity in contemporary work contexts is further underscored by the broader economic conditions shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Montenegro, in particular, represents a context highly vulnerable to such disruptions, given its strong reliance on tourism, which accounts for a substantial share of both GDP and employment. The pandemic had a severe impact on this sector, with tourist arrivals declining by more than 80% and tourism revenues dropping by approximately 86% in 2020 (OECD, 2022). This contraction contributed to a significant decline in overall economic activity, with GDP decreasing by around 15% and unemployment rising markedly (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). Although partial recovery was observed in 2021 and 2022, economic conditions remained unstable, particularly in tourism-dependent sectors (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies - wiiw, 2023). In such a context, employees were likely exposed to heightened job insecurity and increased job demands, making it particularly relevant to examine the mechanisms through which job insecurity affects employee well-being.

To better understand these mechanisms, the present study draws on the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). According to this framework, job demands—defined as aspects of the job that require sustained physical or psychological effort—are associated with physiological and psychological costs and may lead to strain through a health-impairment process. Job insecurity can be conceptualized as a hindrance job demand, as it reflects a chronic stressor that threatens the continuity and stability of employment. As such, it is likely to deplete employees' energetic resources and contribute to adverse outcomes, particularly in contexts characterized by heightened uncertainty and instability.

Within the JD–R framework, burnout represents a key outcome of the health-impairment process. The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory conceptualizes burnout as comprising two dimensions: exhaustion, reflecting the depletion of energetic resources, and disengagement, reflecting psychological distancing from work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001; Demerouti et al., 2003). While both dimensions are theoretically relevant, exhaustion is often considered the more immediate manifestation of strain, whereas disengagement may reflect a more distal coping response. Accordingly, burnout may represent an important mechanism through which job insecurity translates into reduced well-being.

Drawing on these considerations, the present study examined whether burnout, conceptualized as exhaustion and disengagement, mediates the relationship between job insecurity and employee well-being.

2. Method

Data were collected in autumn 2022 in Montenegro, during a period of heightened uncertainty related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 275 employees participated in the study (due to missing data, N = 170–230, depending on the analysis). The sample consisted of 64.5% men and 32.5% women, while 2.9% did not report gender. The mean age was 31.4 years (SD = 11.95), and the average work experience was 7.66 years (SD = 9.06). The majority of participants worked for private organizations (57.2%), followed by state-owned organizations (32.3%), organizations with mixed ownership (7.1%), and self-employed individuals (3.9%). Most participants (71.7%) perceived their socio-economic status as average, 19.5% as above average, and 8.8% as below average.

The online questionnaire included the Job Insecurity Scale (De Witte, 2000), the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Demerouti et al., 2003), and the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Topp et al., 2015), and a set of demographic questions. Job insecurity was measured with four items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher job insecurity (e.g., "I feel insecure about the future of my job"; Cronbach's α = .74). Burnout was assessed using the OLBI, comprising two dimensions: exhaustion (e.g., "There are days when I feel tired before I arrive at work"; Cronbach's α = .74) and disengagement (e.g., "I frequently talk about my work in a negative way"; Cronbach's α = .69), rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Well-being was measured using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (e.g., "I have felt cheerful and in good spirits"), rated on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from never or almost never to always or almost always (Cronbach's α = .86). Higher scores on all scales indicated higher levels of the respective constructs. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among variables while controlling for gender, age, overall work experience, and organizational ownership.

3. Results

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether job insecurity, disengagement, and exhaustion predicted well-being. The overall model was significant, explaining 38.9% of the variance in well-being, R^2 = .39, $F(3, 193) = 40.94$, $p < .001$. Exhaustion (β = −.38, $p < .001$) and job insecurity (β = −.25, $p < .001$) emerged as significant negative predictors of well-being, whereas disengagement was not (β = −.13, $p = .075$).

A mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 to examine whether exhaustion mediated the relationship between job insecurity and well-being. Job insecurity significantly predicted exhaustion (B = 0.27, SE = 0.04, t = 7.25, $p < .001$). In turn, exhaustion significantly predicted lower well-being when controlling for job insecurity (B = −0.72, SE = 0.10, t = −7.31, $p < .001$). The total effect of job insecurity on well-being was significant (B = −0.45, SE = 0.06, $p < .001$). When exhaustion was included in the model, the direct effect remained significant but reduced (B = −0.26, SE = 0.06, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. Bootstrap analysis (5,000 samples) confirmed a significant indirect effect (B = −0.19, BootSE = 0.04, 95% CI [−0.28, −0.12]).

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between job insecurity and employee well-being, with a particular focus on burnout, conceptualized as exhaustion and disengagement, as a mediating mechanism (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). The findings provide clear support for the health-impairment process proposed by the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017). Specifically, job insecurity emerged as a significant negative predictor of well-being, both directly and indirectly through exhaustion. Importantly, the observed partial mediation by exhaustion underscores its role as a key mechanism through which job insecurity translates into reduced well-being. These results suggest that job insecurity functions as a hindrance demand that initiates a strain process, whereby sustained exposure depletes employees' energetic resources, leading to exhaustion and, consequently, diminished well-being.

The findings should be interpreted within the broader economic context of Montenegro during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Montenegro is highly dependent on tourism, which accounted for a substantial share of both GDP and employment prior to the pandemic. However, the sector was severely affected by the crisis, with tourist arrivals declining by more than 80% and tourism revenues dropping by approximately 86% in 2020. This sharp contraction contributed to a significant decline in overall economic activity, with GDP decreasing by around 15% and unemployment rising markedly. Although partial recovery was observed in 2021 and 2022, economic conditions remained unstable, particularly in tourism-dependent sectors. In such a context, employees were likely exposed to heightened job insecurity, increased workload due to workforce reductions and absences, and prolonged uncertainty. From a JD–R perspective, these conditions represent intensified job demands that may deplete employees' energetic resources and contribute to the health-impairment process.

Interestingly, disengagement did not emerge as a significant mediator in the relationship between job insecurity and well-being. This finding suggests that, in the present context, the effects of job insecurity may be more strongly reflected in the energetic component of burnout rather than in its motivational component. Within the JD–R framework, exhaustion represents the core manifestation of the health-impairment process, whereas disengagement reflects a more distal, motivational response characterized by psychological distancing from work. In a context marked by heightened uncertainty and job instability, employees may be less likely to detach from their work due to concerns about job loss, and instead remain engaged while experiencing increased strain and fatigue. This pattern may explain why exhaustion, but not disengagement, mediated the relationship between job insecurity and well-being. This interpretation is also consistent with the conceptualization of burnout in the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, where exhaustion captures the primary strain reaction, while disengagement reflects a more context-dependent and potentially constrained coping response (Demerouti et al., 2003; Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model by clarifying the mechanisms through which job insecurity influences employee well-being. Specifically, the results highlight exhaustion as a core component of the health-impairment process, suggesting that the energetic dimension of burnout may be more proximal to strain outcomes than disengagement in contexts of heightened uncertainty. These findings also underscore the importance of distinguishing between burnout dimensions when examining mediating processes within the JD–R framework.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of reducing job insecurity and managing excessive job demands in order to protect employee well-being. Organizations should implement transparent communication practices and provide support mechanisms aimed at mitigating uncertainty and preventing exhaustion. Interventions focused on monitoring and alleviating employee strain may be particularly important in contexts characterized by heightened instability.

Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of exhaustion as a key mechanism through which job insecurity undermines employee well-being, particularly in contexts characterized by heightened uncertainty.

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