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Job insecurity and trust: Uncovering a mechanism linking job insecurity to well-being

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ABSTRACT

Job insecurity has well-documented negative effects for individuals as well as organisations. However, the mechanisms by which job insecurity relates to its outcomes have received less research attention. The purpose of this study is to investigate trust in the organisation as a potential mechanism that may explain why job insecurity relates to two well-documented outcomes: decreased job satisfaction and lowered mental health. These hypotheses were tested in a Swedish longitudinal sample that consists of employees (longitudinal $n = 906$) from three organisations, using structural equation modelling. Overall, the results showed support for our hypotheses. Our findings reveal an indirect effect of trust on job satisfaction, regardless of whether the previous levels of job satisfaction were controlled for. With regard to mental health, the indirect effect was only evident when previous levels of mental health were not controlled for. The results of this study contribute to our understanding about the intervening factors in the relationship between job insecurity and outcomes. Moreover, the results might be important for human resources departments and managers when there are indications that employees are worrying about the future of their jobs.

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Job insecurity; trust; mediator

Introduction

Employees today frequently experience that the future of their employment is at stake; they experience job insecurity. Years of research on job insecurity have led to a consensus that feeling uncertain about the future of one's employment is associated with a variety of negative consequences, both in the short (see Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002), and long term (De Witte, Pienaar, & De Cuyper, 2016). To advance the existing research on job insecurity, there has been an increasing focus on the mechanisms by which this work stressor relates to its outcomes, that is, how job insecurity develops into subsequent consequences through intermediary factors (De Witte et al., 2016). The

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present study constitutes a contribution to this area by investigating trust in the organisation as a potential mechanism linking job insecurity to its outcomes.

Trust in the organisation represents an important characteristic of a healthy employee–employer relationship (Guest, 2004), which constitutes a competitive advantage for organisations (Barney & Hansen, 1994) and contributes to long-term organisational success and survival (Mishra, 1996). In the context of job insecurity, the loss of trust in the organisation has been found to be associated with feeling uncertain about the future of one's employment (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002).

The relationship between trust and job insecurity can further be understood through the psychological contract framework. The loss of trust can be interpreted as an indicator of the deterioration of the employee–employer relationship, where employees who experience job insecurity also perceive their psychological contract with the organisation to be broken. Both psychological contract breach and trust have previously been associated with impaired general (Conway & Briner, 2002, 2005; Conway, Guest, & Trenberth, 2011) and work-related well-being such as organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002).

Similar findings have been well-documented for job insecurity, where decreased job satisfaction and poor mental well-being are two of the best-documented consequences of job insecurity, according to two meta-analyses on the outcomes of job insecurity (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). However, a recent study by De Witte et al. (2016) highlighted that the development of the relationship between job insecurity and work-related well-being over time is less well-documented, suggesting that the mechanisms linking the two may need further investigation. Therefore, this study investigates the quality of the employee–employer relationship, as indicated by the level of trust reported among employees, in relation to job insecurity, and how trust perceptions, in turn, affect work-related well-being (i.e. job satisfaction) as well as general well-being (i.e. mental health) over time.

The present study contributes to job insecurity research in several ways. First, trust in the organisation has not yet been studied as a potential mechanism linking job insecurity and well-being. The results of the present study have the potential to add to theory building around the underlying mechanisms linking job insecurity to its consequences (De Witte & Sverke, 2008) by adding information about how a specific mechanism, trust, relates to how the relationship between the employee and employer is affected by job insecurity. Second, we use a two-wave repeated measurement design, where the effect of job insecurity on well-being outcomes is studied prospectively, to increase our understanding of the relationship between job insecurity and its outcome over time. Third, investigating the mechanisms behind job insecurity also has practical implications, as the results of this research may be translated into recommendations on how to potentially reduce the negative effects of job insecurity.

Job insecurity and the employee–employer relationship

Job insecurity has been defined as employees' concern about the continuity of their employment (Klandermans & Van Vuuren, 1999). To understand job insecurity from a relational perspective, the psychological contract framework is used in the present study (Rousseau, 1995). In contrast to the formal employment contract between employee and employer, the psychological contract captures employees' expectations of reciprocal obligations (i.e.

what employees expect to do for their employer) and entitlements (i.e. what employees expect to receive from their employer in return; Parks, Kidder, Gallagher, & McLean Parks, 1998). Psychological contracts can be differentiated by their content. First, there is the *transactional* psychological contract, focusing on economic and performance factors and having a finite time frame with a clear description of work roles and responsibilities (Millward & Brewerton, 2000; Rousseau, 1995). Second, there is the *relational* psychological contract, entailing a long-term and open-ended employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995), which is more dynamic and has a broader scope, reaching beyond the economic exchange of the formal contract. One typical expectation that is included in the relational contract is that of job security, which the organisation is expected to provide in exchange for the employee's loyalty (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2007).

The psychological contract can be considered to be violated when employees perceive that their employer is not fulfilling the obligations associated with the psychological contract (Gakovic & Tetrck, 2003). Job insecurity has been described as one source of breach of the relational psychological contract, in that the continuation of the employment relationship is under threat; hence, job security in exchange for performance or loyalty can no longer be expected (Piccoli & De Witte, 2015). This breach is likely to result in a deterioration of the relationship between the employee and the employer, manifested by distrust toward the employer among employees (Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Moreover, employees experience intense emotional and attitudinal responses to a psychosocial contract breach (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), including decreased psychological well-being (Conway et al., 2011; Conway & Briner, 2002, 2005; Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), decreased job satisfaction and commitment (Lester, Turnley, Bloodgood, & Bolino, 2002; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowsky, & Bravo, 2007). Similar outcomes have been recorded in research on the consequences of job insecurity, where lowered job satisfaction and decreased well-being (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002) are well-documented consequences of job insecurity (e.g. Chirumbolo & Hellgren, 2003; Hellgren & Sverke, 2003; Sverke et al., 2002). However, a recent review has highlighted the need to further study these relationships over time to strengthen the evidence for longitudinal outcomes (De Witte et al., 2016).

Trust in the organisation as a mediator

Trust is defined as a psychological state comprising “the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intention or behavior of the other” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). It incorporates a risk perception (Das & Teng, 2004) and is a future-oriented state that is shaped through the actions of the counterpart (Robinson, 1996). It can have different foci, for instance, trust in the supervisor, in colleagues, or in the organisation (Whitener, 1997). In this study, we focus on trust in the organisation.

Trust in the organisation might also be an important mechanism relating job insecurity to its outcomes. The degree of employee trust in their employer is dependent on the trustworthiness of the employer, which is based on the organisation’s previous actions, benevolence, and integrity. When employees experience job insecurity and the accompanying psychological contract breach, perceptions of benevolence and integrity of the organisation (i.e. whether the organisation is fulfilling promises and treating employees fairly)

are likely to be negatively affected (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In addition, organisational actions such as restructuring and downsizing, which have previously been linked to increased feelings of job insecurity (De Witte, 2005), may also negatively affect the level of trust experienced by employees.

Based on the psychological contract framework, job insecurity perceptions signal a breach of the psychological contract and also results in a deterioration of the employee–employer relationship, which can be manifested as a loss of trust (Conway et al., 2011; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Zhao et al., 2007). Employees no longer believe that the organisation will deliver on its implied obligations and may trust their employer to a lesser extent due to the perceived breach of the psychological contract. Decreased trust as a consequence of job insecurity has been documented in a variety of studies (Ashford et al., 1989; Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). Loss of trust constitutes an emotional event (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007), which can result in consequences varying from mild annoyance and disappointment to more severe reactions where employees respond with anger, if they feel that their whole belief system is challenged (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000). This emotional response needs regulation to maintain a professional relationship in the continued interactions between the employee and the organisation. However, enacting emotions which may stand in contrast with the emotions that are experienced requires effort. This relates closely to the resources required by engaging in emotional labour, which has been related to exhaustion and lowered well-being (cf. Grandey, 2000). Moreover, employees may, as a result of this loss of trust, become more suspicious towards the intentions of their employer and no longer believe in a beneficial reciprocal relationship between themselves and their employer. The loss of trust may also result in the perception that the employer's actions are no longer predictable and all future actions are perceived as uncertain (Thau, Aquino, & Wittek, 2007). These immediate reactions to the loss of trust, as well as the unpredictability of future actions of the employee, is over time expected to relate to poor employee well-being (cf. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A perceived lack of reciprocity, indicated by a psychological contract breach, has been empirically related to negative work-related emotions (Feather & Rauter, 2004; Reisel, Probst, Chia, Maloles, & König, 2010; Schaufeli, 2006). Hence, the loss of trust might be a plausible mechanism linking job insecurity to well-being outcomes and providing a theoretical explanation of this relationship, based on the psychological contract framework. We will test the following two hypotheses (see Figure 1 for a conceptual model), investigating this potential mechanism:

Hypothesis 1: Trust in the employer functions as a mediator between job insecurity and job satisfaction. Job insecurity affects trust negatively, whereas trust is positively related to job satisfaction over time.

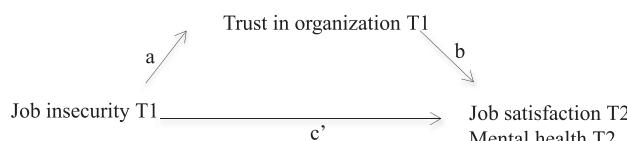


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Notes: $a \cdot b =$ indirect effect, $c' =$ total effect.

Hypothesis 2: Trust in the employer functions as a mediator between job insecurity and mental health. Job insecurity affects trust negatively and trust is positively related to mental health over time.

Trust in the organisation as a meditator of the job insecurity/well-being relationship aligns well with existing research on factors mediating the relationship between job insecurity and its outcomes. These intervening factors can be broadly grouped as either focusing on different theoretical explanations or focusing on testing proximal (immediate) job insecurity outcomes as potential mediators. Theory-driven mechanisms that have been studied include psychological contract breach (e.g. Schumacher, Schreurs, Van Emmerik, & De Witte, 2016), fairness (e.g. Bernhard-Oettel, De Cuyper, Schreurs, & De Witte, 2011), dissatisfaction with basic human needs (e.g. Van den Broeck et al., 2014), and loss of control (e.g. Vander Elst, Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2014). When testing different proximal job insecurity outcomes as mediators, work-related well-being (e.g. job satisfaction; Chirumbolo & Hellgren, 2003; Mauno, De Cuyper, Tolvanen, Kinnunen, & Mäkkikangas, 2014) and work-related attitudes; Staufenbiel & König, 2010) has been found to mediate the relationship between job insecurity and several outcomes such as performance, turnover intention, absenteeism, and mental health. Trust in the organisation represents a theoretical mechanism suggested by the psychological contract theory, namely that trust is a prerequisite for a stable psychological contract. In addition, trust represents a proximal outcome that has been investigated in several previous studies and is connected to work-related and general well-being in this study.

Method

Participants and procedure

The questionnaire data for this study was drawn from a longitudinal (two-wave) study investigating the effects of changes in working life on employee health and well-being over time. Three Swedish organisations from different sectors (manufacturing, finance, and a municipality) were included in order to increase the generalizability of the study results. However, to keep the roles within the organisations comparable, only administrative and white-collar staff were included.

Sample 1 (Time 1 $n = 494$) consisted of employees from a larger manufacturing company that specialises in household appliances and forestry and farming equipment with their headquarters in southern Sweden. The participants had a mean age of 45 years and 27% were female. Approximately 45% had a university education. Sample 2 (Time 1 $n = 593$) consisted of employees from an accounting firm with their headquarters in Stockholm and smaller offices all over Sweden. The mean age was 43 years and 55% of the employees were female. Sixty-eight per cent had a university education. Sample 3 (Time 1 $n = 560$) consisted of administrative employees employed by a municipality north of Stockholm. Employees were on average 49 years old and 76% were women. Sixty-one per cent of the employees had a university education.

All employees received paper-based questionnaires to their home addresses at both time points (November 2004 and November 2005). The one-year time lag was agreed

on with the participating organisations for practical reasons: to promote high participation yearly surveys were expected to reduce the risk of survey fatigue in staff. Yearly surveys also provided some control for seasonal fluctuations. The timing of the survey was chosen so that the survey was sent out well after summer vacation but before the Christmas break rush.

Alongside the questionnaire, participants received a postage-paid pre-addressed response envelope for returning the questionnaire to the research team. The envelope also included a letter from the research team explaining the aim of the study, instructions on how to fill out the survey and information assuring the confidentiality of the responses and that their participation was voluntary. Of the 1647 employees who received the questionnaire at Time 1, 1233 employees answered (response rate 75%). At Time 2, all staff in all three organisations were invited again, regardless of whether they had participated at Time 1 or not. New staff members were invited as well, resulting in a total sample of 1598 invited and 906 who participated, for a response rate of 56%. The longitudinal response rate – those who participated at both time points – was 55% (906 persons). The effective sample for this study includes only those who participated at both time points. Internal missing responses were handled by listwise deletion as it was determined that the missingness mechanism was random, based on a non-significant Little's missing completely at random test (Little, 1988) in the longitudinal sample and very low rates of missing responses, 1–3% per variable. Logistic regression was conducted to predict attrition at Time 2 with the studied variable Time 1. Attrition was predicted by the combination of the predictors ($\chi^2_{(8)} = 18.36$, $p < .05$), but the coefficients for the individual Time 1 predictors indicated that none of them were very strong predictors of attrition.

Measures

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and zero-order correlations are displayed in [Table 1](#).

Job insecurity was measured using a three-item measure (Hellgren, Sverke, & Isaksson, 1999), where response alternatives ranged from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). An example item is “I worry about being able to keep my job.” High scores on this scale indicate worry and uncertainty regarding the future existence of the employment. The reliability of the scale was good (see [Table 1](#)).

Organisational trust was measured with four items based on Robinson (1996), where response alternatives ranged from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). An example item is “I am sure that I can trust my employer.” High scores on this scale indicate trust in the organisation. The reliability of the scale was good (see [Table 1](#)).

Job satisfaction was measured using three items developed by Hellgren, Sjöberg, and Sverke (1997), based on Brayfield and Rothe (1951). Response alternatives ranged from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). A sample item is “I am content with the job I have.” High scores indicate satisfaction with the job. The reliability of the scale was good (see [Table 1](#)).

Mental health was measured with twelve items from the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1979), where response alternatives ranged between 1 (never) to 4 (always). The questionnaire asked to what extent a number of health-related symptoms had been experienced over the past two weeks. A sample item is “Have you over the past two weeks been

**Table 1.** Correlations, descriptive statistics and reliabilities (on the diagonal).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Sample	2.12	0.73	–	0.16*	−0.36*	0.15*	−0.07*	0.04	0.08	−0.00	−0.08*	0.06	0.09*	0.06
2. Age	46.09	10.66		–	0.09*	−0.21*	−0.02	0.08*	0.21*	0.04	−0.01	0.12*	0.19*	0.06
3. Gender	1.43	–			–	0.02	−0.05	0.08*	0.03	0.09	−0.02	0.07*	0.03	0.00
4. Education	0.60	–				–	−0.14*	0.01	0.00	0.08	−0.10*	0.02	−0.00	0.09
5. Job insecurity Time 1	1.73	0.93					0.90	−0.42*	−0.36*	−0.29*	0.58*	−0.34*	−0.27*	−0.23*
6. Trust Time 1	3.29	0.93						0.91	0.57*	0.33*	−0.34*	0.68*	0.45*	0.29*
7. Job satisfaction Time 1	3.86	0.87							0.88	0.46*	−0.30*	0.48*	0.69*	0.38*
8. Mental health Time 1	3.29	0.36								0.81	−0.33*	0.28*	0.38*	0.60*
9. Job insecurity Time 2	1.60	0.91									0.91	−0.39*	−0.38*	−0.33*
10. Trust Time 2	3.28	0.92										0.93	0.59*	0.31*
11. Job satisfaction Time 2	3.84	0.89											0.90	0.47*
12. Mental health Time 2	3.30	0.36												0.82

Notes: not applicable. The scales ranged from 1 to 5 except gender (women = 0 and men = 1), age (in years) and education (which was coded 1 = university education and 0 = lower levels of education) and mental health (1–4). In the diagonal: Cronbach's alpha.

* $p < .05$.

feeling unhappy and depressed?" The scale has been reversed so that high scores represent higher levels of mental health. The reliability of the scale was good (see Table 1).

Statistical analyses

We used structural equation modelling (SEM) in Mplus 7.3 with maximum likelihood estimation to test the hypotheses. Multiple fit indices were employed to evaluate model fit, including the chi-square statistic, the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). Traditional cut-off criteria ($CFI > 0.90$, SRMR and RMSEA < 0.08) were used to indicate acceptable fit (Kline, 2010; Marsh, 2007), while more strict criteria (CFI and $TLI > 0.95$; SRMR < 0.08 and RMSEA < 0.06) were used to indicate good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Dimensionality of constructs and measurement invariance

Following the recommendations by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the measurement model was estimated prior to estimating the structural model using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Here the hypothesised measurement model (i.e. a four-factor model with job insecurity, trust, job satisfaction, and mental health as separate latent variables) was tested first and then compared with three alternative models (see Table 2). The latent variables were allowed to correlate and analyses were conducted for the Time 1 and Time 2 variables separately.

Next, longitudinal factor analysis was conducted to rule out temporal change as the reason for changes in the measurement model (Brown, 2006). Different models were specified and compared: the freely estimated model (Model 1), where the lagged paths between the corresponding latent factors from Time 1 and Time 2 were estimated; the first constrained model (Model 2), where factor loadings were constrained to be equal over time; the second constrained model (Model 3), where the indicator intercepts were constrained to be equal over time and the third constrained model (Model 4) where the

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis at Time 1, Time 2 and longitudinal CFA.

Models	df	χ^2	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	AIC	Model comparison		$\Delta\chi^2$
							df	$\Delta\chi^2$	
1. Model 1 Time 1	224	567.99*	0.04	0.05	0.95	30,480.29			
2. Model 2 Time 1	227	1523.20*	0.07	0.08	0.84	31,429.50	1 vs. 2	3	955.21*
3. Model 3 Time 1	229	2901.06*	0.11	0.96	0.68	32,803.36	2 vs. 3	2	1377.86*
4. Model 4 Time 1	230	3573.00*	0.12	0.12	0.60	33,473.30	3 vs. 4	1	671.94*
1. Model 1 Time 2	224	566.77*	0.04	0.05	0.96	28,788.10			
2. Model 2 Time 2	227	1722.05*	0.08	0.08	0.84	29,937.38	1 vs. 2	3	1155.28*
3. Model 3 Time 2	229	3391.51*	0.10	0.10	0.66	31,602.84	2 vs. 3	2	1669.46*
4. Model 4 Time 2	230	4188.36*	0.13	0.13	0.58	32,397.70	3 vs. 4	1	796.85*
1. Freely estimated	961	2279.55*	0.03	0.06	0.93	57,879.48			
2. Loadings Invariance	980	2294.43*	0.03	0.06	0.93	57,856.32	1vs. 2	19	14.88 ns
3. Intercept Invariance	1003	2319.07*	0.03	0.06	0.93	57,834.96	2 vs. 3	23	24.65 ns
4. Error variance Invariance	1026	2430.08*	0.03	0.06	0.93	57,899.97	3 vs. 4	23	111.01*

Notes: Model 1: four factors: job insecurity, trust, job satisfaction and mental health; Model 2: three factors: job insecurity/trust, job satisfaction, and mental health; Model 3: two factors: job insecurity/trust/job satisfaction, mental health; Model 4: one factor: job insecurity/trust/job satisfaction/mental health.

* $p < .05$.

indicator error variances were constrained to be equal. Finding support for the first level of constraints (Model 2) is sufficient to rule out that changes in the relationship between the studied variables are due to changes in the measurement over time (Little, Preacher, Selig, & Card, 2007).

Tests of the hypotheses

We estimated the mediating role of trust in the relationship between the predictor job insecurity and the outcomes job satisfaction and mental health using the recommended procedure for testing mediational models in SEM, where the magnitude of indirect effect (product term of Path A from job insecurity to trust and Path B from trust to the outcome) is tested using bootstrapping procedures to calculate the 95% bias-corrected (BC) confidence intervals (CIs) (Hayes, 2009). The direct and indirect effects of job insecurity on job satisfaction and mental health via trust were estimated simultaneously. Since the data were collected at two time points, a decision had to be made regarding at what time point the variables should be modelled. Job insecurity, the predictor, was measured at Time 1, and the two outcomes at Time 1 (to control for baseline levels) and at Time 2. We decided that it was most appropriate to model the mediator, trust, at Time 1. Based on the psychological contract theory, which suggests that perceptions of breach and the consequences of breach (impaired trust) are fairly immediate (Rousseau, 1995), it made sense to estimate the simultaneous effect of job insecurity on trust rather than the one-year lagged effect.

Selection of covariates

To control for potential effects of confounding variables, we control for gender, age, and education, all of which have been shown to be related to job insecurity and its outcomes in previous research (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Keim, Landis, Pierce, & Earnest, 2014; Sverke et al., 2002). We also controlled for the sample of the participants. However, as these variables did not affect the model, the results presented here do not include these control variables; the results including control variables are available upon request.

Results

Dimensionality tests

Results from the CFA are shown in [Table 2](#). For both time points, the proposed four-factor solution fits the data the best. Hence, we can be reasonably confident that the factors specified represent separate constructs. The results from the longitudinal CFA (also in [Table 2](#)) show that both invariance of the factor loadings and invariance of the indicator intercepts could be established. The error variances were not found to be invariant; however, for the type of analysis conducted in this study, the invariance of the factor loadings is sufficient to exclude over-time measurement variance as the reason for the structural relationships.

Predicting job satisfaction

Results of mediation analyses testing Hypothesis 1 showed that job insecurity measured at Time 1 was related to a decrease in job satisfaction at Time 2 indirectly through

organisational trust at Time 1, when controlling for Time 1 levels of job satisfaction. As can be seen in [Table 3](#), employees who reported higher levels of job insecurity reported less trust in their employer compared to employees who reported less job insecurity, and employees who trusted their employer to a lesser extent expressed a decrease in job satisfaction. The BC bootstrap CI (based on 10,000 bootstrap samples) did not include zero, indicating a significant indirect effect. The direct and total effect of job insecurity on job satisfaction was non-significant. When not controlling for Time 1 levels of job satisfaction, and thus investigating the relationship between job insecurity and levels of job satisfaction, the direct and total effect of the relationship between job insecurity and job satisfaction became significant (see [Table 3](#)). With exception of that, the results were the same but the coefficients were remarkably stronger.

Taken together, these results indicate that even when previous levels of job satisfaction are accounted for, job insecurity exerts an influence on subsequent job satisfaction through its influence on trust.

Predicting mental health

The results of the mediation analyses testing Hypothesis 2 – that job insecurity at Time 1 is related to a decrease in mental health at Time 2 indirectly through trust at Time 1 (when controlling for Time 1 levels of mental health) – were not in line with our predictions (see [Table 3](#)) as no significant indirect effect was found. However, when only focusing on the relationship between job insecurity at Time 1 and the levels of mental health at Time 2 (and not controlling for levels of mental health), the indirect effect of job insecurity on mental health through trust was significant, as was the direct effect of job insecurity on mental health (see [Table 3](#)). Job insecurity was directly related to lower levels of mental health at Time 2. Also, job insecurity was related to lower levels of trust, which in turn was related to lower mental health at Time 2.

These results indicate that when previous levels of mental health are accounted for, job insecurity was not found to exert influence on changes in mental health. However, they also indicate that job insecurity was related to subsequent levels of mental health through its influence on trust.

Discussion

Previous studies have established that employees who experience job insecurity report a variety of negative reactions ([Cheng & Chan, 2008](#); [De Witte et al., 2016](#); [Sverke et al., 2002](#)). To shed light on the mechanisms, there has been an increased focus on the investigation of mediating variables. These intervening variables are often derived from theories such as social exchange theory (e.g. psychological contract breach or fairness; [Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2011](#)) or appraisal theory (e.g. loss of control; [Vander Elst, Van den Broeck, et al., 2014](#)) to name some. Other mediators have been chosen to capture and investigate the sequence of consequences that follow job insecurity over time ([Mauno et al., 2014](#)). The purpose of this study was to contribute to this line of research by investigating trust in the organisation as a mediator that can be described as both a theoretically derived mechanism based on the psychological contract framework, as well as a mediator that has previously been studied as an important outcome of job insecurity and predictor

**Table 3.** Mediation of the effect of job insecurity on job satisfaction and mental health through trust (unstandardised coefficients).

	Controlling for Time 1 levels of the outcome variable						Without controlling for Time 1 levels of the outcome variable					
	Job satisfaction			Mental health			Job satisfaction			Mental health		
	Coeff.	95% CI		Coeff.	95% CI		Coeff.	95% CI		Coeff.	95% CI	
	Coeff.	Lower	Upper	Coeff.	Lower	Upper	Coeff.	Lower	Upper	Coeff.	Lower	Upper
Path a	-0.48*	-0.56	-0.40	-0.48*	-0.56	-0.40	-0.46*	-0.54	-0.39	-0.46*	-0.54	-0.39
Path b	0.09*	0.02	0.16	0.02	-0.02	0.06	0.46*	0.38	0.56	0.09*	0.05	0.14
Path c'	0.04	-0.04	0.12	-0.01	-0.05	0.03	-0.10*	-0.20	-0.01	-0.05	-0.10	-0.01
Indirect effect (path a × b)	-0.04*	-0.08	-0.01	-0.01	-0.03	0.01	-0.21*	-0.27	-0.16	-0.46*	-0.54	-0.39
Time 1 outcome	0.75*	0.66	0.84	-0.84*	-1.18	-0.60						
Total effect (Path c)	-0.004	-0.08	0.07	-0.002	-0.04	0.04	-0.32*	-0.41	-0.23	-0.09*	-0.14	-0.05

Notes: Path a represents the relation between job insecurity and trust, Path b between trust and the outcome (job satisfaction or mental health), Path c' represents the direct relationship between job insecurity and the outcomes (job satisfaction or mental health) whereas the indirect effect (a × b) quantifies the indirect effect of job insecurity on the outcome (job satisfaction or mental health) through trust. Coefficients are considered significant when the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval does not include zero; model fit when controlling for Time 1: $\chi^2 = 2054.74$, $df = 654$, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.89, SRMR: 0.08, AIC: 44,290.385; model fit when not controlling for Time 1: $\chi^2 = 602.09$, $df = 224$, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.95. SRMR: 0.05, AIC: 30,071.79.

of other job insecurity outcomes, such as general and work-related well-being. More specifically, we suggest that high levels of job insecurity are related to low levels of trust in the organisation, which captures the psychological contract breach that occurs when employees experience job insecurity (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2007). The loss of trust may in turn provide an explanation for why employees who experience job insecurity report lower levels of job satisfaction and lower well-being over time, which are well-documented outcomes of job insecurity (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002) as well as outcomes of psychological contract breach (Conway et al., 2011).

In support of our hypotheses, the overall results provided evidence for the mediating role of trust in the relationship between job insecurity and subsequent levels of job satisfaction and mental health, when previous levels of the dependent variable were not controlled for. In the more conservative tests, investigating whether job insecurity was related to a change in the outcomes over time (where Time 1 levels of the outcome variables were controlled for), there was no indirect effect through trust on mental health. Moreover, the total effect of job insecurity on mental health was much smaller when Time 1 levels of mental health were controlled for. For job satisfaction as the outcome, the indirect effect of job insecurity through trust was found in both types of analyses, even in the more conservative analysis that included the Time 1 levels of job satisfaction. Not only do the results support that trust is an important characteristic of a healthy employee–employer relationship and a predictor of job satisfaction over time, they also support the idea that trust is a potentially important mediator of the relationship between job insecurity and job satisfaction.

The results were more ambiguous when mental health was the outcome, where the mediating effect was weaker for mental health than for job satisfaction. This may indicate that the mediating role of trust is more important for job satisfaction than for mental health. One explanation for this could be the different nature of the two well-being measures. Whereas job satisfaction captures work-related well-being, whereas mental health is a general well-being measure (Warr, 2007). Both job insecurity and trust in the organisation are work-specific constructs, which might explain why the mediating effects were stronger for the work-related outcome. Because general well-being is a broader construct, it is also affected by so much more than the situation at work. Job satisfaction, on the other hand, is likely to be more closely tied to the work situation, and thus a stronger relationship between job insecurity and job satisfaction, and trust and job satisfaction, is a reasonable result. Moreover, in line with the inconclusive longitudinal evidence for job satisfaction as a work-related well-being outcome (De Witte et al., 2016), our study did not find a longitudinal effect of job insecurity on job satisfaction when Time 1 levels of job satisfaction were controlled for.

The results of the present study also give an indication that different mechanisms might be more meaningful depending on the type of outcome under investigation. This result is in line with research by Vander Elst, De Cuyper, et al. (2014), where psychological contract breach and control were investigated simultaneously as potential intervening variables in the relationship between job insecurity and a variety of outcomes. This study found that these two mediators functioned differently for the different outcomes under investigation. In future studies, trust in the organisation might be investigated as a mechanism in the relationship between job insecurity and counterproductive or deviant workplace behaviours (Lim, 1997; Reisel et al., 2010). Breach of the psychological contract, and therefore

the lack of reciprocity between employees and employers can be indicated through a loss of trust, which has often been associated with withdrawal reactions in employees. In their most extreme form, counterproductive or deviant work behaviours can be seen as one way for employees to respond to the perceived lack of reciprocity (Thau et al., 2007). Including trust when investigating job insecurity and these type of outcomes might be an interesting and important avenue for further research.

The results of the present study contribute to research investigating job insecurity and how it is linked to its outcomes from the perspective of the psychological contract framework. Psychological contract breach can be studied directly (Vander Elst, De Cuyper, et al., 2014; Piccoli & De Witte, 2015). Whereas in other studies, psychological contract breach has been studied indirectly by, for example, investigating fairness perceptions as a mediator between job insecurity and individual well-being outcomes as well as organisational outcomes (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2011; Schumacher et al., 2016). Our study investigates trust in the organisation as another important indirect indicator of psychological contract breach, as loss of trust is expected to occur when employees experience job insecurity. In future studies, it would be interesting to compare and contrast different mediators (e.g. fairness and trust) to understand which of them seem to be the primary mechanism linking job insecurity to its outcomes. Therefore, future studies should, in addition to investigating new mechanisms, also include other potential mediators that are theoretically aligned and compare their importance for job insecurity outcomes.

Evidence around the intervening variables between job insecurity and its outcomes, including the one presented in the present study, can be related to studies on predictors of job insecurity as well as factors that might buffer the relationship between job insecurity and its outcomes. In particular, research focused on organisational actions might be important. For example, communication within the organisation (Jiang & Probst, 2014; Vander Elst, Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2010) and participation in decision-making (Vander Elst et al., 2010) have been identified as important factors when predicting job insecurity and when investigating buffering factors of the negative outcomes of job insecurity. Incorporating existing studies on the mechanisms may clarify what organisations, and specifically human resource departments and managers, should focus on to prevent job insecurity and its outcomes. Clear and precise communication is important, particularly during times of change, with the aim to keep employees informed (e.g. employees should feel in control) and to maintain a trusting relationship between the employees and management (Vander Elst et al., 2010). Moreover, providing employees with the opportunity, when possible, to be part of the decision-making processes that affect their workplace is another strategy for organisations to help employees feel in control and open to reciprocity, which should positively affect the relationship between employees and employers. For future research, it is important to further study factors that are within the control of the organisation and its representatives to prevent job insecurity, or at least reduce its negative consequences. For example, one such area is leadership behaviour, which is strongly related to building trusting relationships between employees and employers. However, to date, we do not know enough about the relationship between leadership behaviours and employees' perceptions of job insecurity, with one notable exception being Richter, Tafvelin, and Sverke (2018).

The results of the present study highlight the need for research focused on the intervening mechanisms in the relationship between job insecurity and its outcomes; too little is

known about the temporal development of job insecurity and how it relates to its consequences over time, as well as by what mechanism job insecurity affects its specific outcomes. However, this kind of information is critical for designing interventions to prevent job insecurity from occurring, or to minimise the negative consequences when it occurs, as suggested by De Witte, Vander Elst, and De Cuyper (2015).

Methodological considerations

We acknowledge that the current study has some shortcomings. First, this study is based on data collected in 2004/2005. Even though national representative statistics show that the work situation including job insecurity as of today is comparable to that of 2004/2005 (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2014), a worldwide decline of trust has been noticed (Harrington, 2017). Therefore, we recommend that this study is replicated with a more recent dataset including data from different countries, capturing variations in the economic and social security system which may affect the studied variables. However, even if the absolute levels of trust and job insecurity may differ, we believe the relationship between job insecurity and trust, and on subsequent outcomes, will be similar at different points in time.

Second, while the longitudinal design of the study is a strength, no conclusions about directionality between the tested relations can be drawn. Based on the conservation of resources framework (Hobfoll, 1989), it is likely that the relationships are reciprocal based on the loss spiral assumption, where resource loss facilitates further resource loss. Future studies should specifically focus on testing the directionality in this relationship. In addition, the length of the time lag (one year) used in this study is a challenge when testing the relationship between job insecurity and trust. Overall, the time lag is important when trying to capture the strength of relationships, however, as the effect of job insecurity on trust is rather a short-term than long-term effect (cf. Garst, Frese, & Molenaar, 2000); a considerably shorter time lag is recommended than the one used in this study. Those who have higher levels of job insecurity will most likely develop also lower levels of trust in the organisation as an immediate response to job insecurity. These lower levels of trust might be due to the perceptions of uncertainty regarding the future of the job, where job insecurity constitutes a breach of the psychological contract (cf. Piccoli & De Witte, 2015; Rousseau, 1995). Due to the nature of the relationship between job insecurity and trust we decided to analyse the relation between job insecurity and trust cross-sectionally instead of using the longitudinal data with one-year time lag which is theoretically less meaningful for this relationship. Using cross-sectional data is, however, a limitation of this study because the causality of the relationship between job insecurity and trust is only based on theoretical reasoning, and no inference about causality can be made based on the cross-sectional data. Moreover, potentially omitted variables can inflate the relationship between job insecurity and trust and no information about longitudinal stability can be gained, to name some of the disadvantages of a partially cross-sectional design. In future research, however, it will be fruitful to test these relationships utilising a longitudinal study design with multiple measurement points within a shorter time frame to better study the time lag of the relationship between job insecurity and trust.

Third, this study relies on self-report data only, introducing the risk of mono-method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Spector, 2006). However, job

insecurity and the other variables in the present study are subjective experiences and they can most accurately be assessed through self-report measures. Outcomes of job insecurity that may be assessed by other methods (e.g. turnover and physiological health indicators) should be explored in future research. To minimise the influence of the common method used, we have taken several measures during the survey construction, such as highlighting the fact that participating in the study is voluntary and that the participants' identity and the privacy of their answers is protected (Conway & Lance, 2010), which has been shown to reduce the influence of acquiescence bias and socially desirable responses (Chan, 2009). Moreover, proximal separation was used to distance the predictor variables from the outcomes in the survey layout. To reduce potential common method bias in survey research the design of the questionnaire plays an important role, where different sections of the questionnaire can be dedicated to different constructs and can be introduced by a short text to help respondents transition from the previous section (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In our survey, the questions were organised in different thematic sections. Within each section, the order of the items measuring different constructs was randomised, increasing the distance between items measuring the different constructs and thereby reducing the risk of inflated correlations due to physical proximity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012; Weijters, Geuens, & Schillewaert, 2009).

Conclusion

The main contribution of this study lies in examining trust as a possible mediator to understand the mechanisms behind job insecurity and its relationship to general and work-specific well-being. For job satisfaction and, to some extent, for mental health, lower levels of trust related to job insecurity were found to link job insecurity to subsequent decreased job satisfaction and lower levels of mental health complaints. This knowledge may be used by practitioners such as human resource personnel and managers to prevent job insecurity from causing a decrease of well-being by focusing on restoring trust even when jobs are perceived to be at risk. Based on the results of the present study, interventions that support and promote a trusting relationship between employees and employers are recommended when there are indications that employees are uncertain about their employment future. In practice, this could be achieved by timely, clear, and transparent communication when organisational changes are being conducted (Vander Elst et al., 2010). The results of the present study highlight the importance of organisational trust for well-being at work.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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