HOW TO MINIMIZE JOB INSECURITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE ROLE OF PROACTIVE AND REACTIVE COPING OVER TIME

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ABSTRACT

Can workers minimize their experience of job insecurity through proactive coping? Contrary to our expectations, this 5-wave weekly survey study indicates that the answer to that question is no: multi-level path modelling results showed that, in the short term, proactive coping related to increased job insecurity at the within-person level. At the between-person level, results indicated that for workers with relatively few resources, proactive coping was even more strongly related to job insecurity. Combining our results with previous findings on proactive coping, we argue that positive outcomes of proactive coping may need more time to establish. This implies that prolonged proactive coping efforts are needed, despite the short-term discomfort.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people do their work, and the amount of certainty people have about maintaining their work. For example, ongoing digitalization processes have been vastly accelerated by the established social distancing measures, telecommuting has become the norm, and many organizations have moved their services online. Moreover, the economic consequences of COVID-19 have led to a steep increase of jobs at risk. As such, job insecurity has become an even more important theme for workers in the current world of work.

Job insecurity refers to the perceived threat to the continuity of one's job or favorable job features (Hellgren et al., 1999). The experience of job insecurity is related to poor psychological and physical health, decreased organizational commitment, decreased work performance, and increased turnover intentions among individuals (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). Evidence indicates that the negative individual consequences of job insecurity may even spill over to decrease the performance of organizations (Reisel et al., 2007) and the well-being of families (Mauno et al., 2017). To prevent further escalation of job insecurity and its negative consequences, individuals, organizations, and society as a whole would benefit from strategies to cope with job insecurity or, preferably, strategies to minimize the development of job insecurity in the first place.

While previous research on coping with job insecurity has increased our understanding on how to minimize the negative consequences of job insecurity (e.g., Menéndez-Espina et al., 2019; Probst & Jiang, 2016), very little is known about whether and how workers can minimize the experience of job insecurity itself. The current study aims to address this gap by investigating the role of proactive coping. Proactive coping refers to future-oriented coping that tries to detect and

proactively manage stressors before they can fully develop (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). We propose that proactive coping can function as a tool to manage the experience of job insecurity. We investigate this proposition by analyzing weekly proactive coping behaviors in relation to changes in job insecurity in a 5-wave longitudinal survey study. To further unpack the role of proactive coping in the job insecurity process, we examine whether or not proactive and reactive coping require different behaviors to be successful. Specifically, we examine whether proactive coping behaviors that are expected to minimize job insecurity can also function in a reactive manner to buffer the negative consequences of job insecurity.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

While proactive coping aims to manage or minimize the development of future stressors, reactive coping is aimed at managing existing stressors. Although this distinction between proactive and reactive coping is theoretically well-defined, it can be difficult to categorize coping behaviors in either one of these categories. As Stiglbauer and Batinic (2015) explained: "*the types of cognitive, behavioral, or emotional efforts made within this [proactive coping] process are not necessarily different from those within reactive coping. However, they are temporally prior and therefore fulfill a different function*" (p. 266). For example, individuals may use career planning as a proactive coping behavior to reduce the development of job insecurity, while career planning may also be used as a reactive coping behavior to decrease the strain resulting from existing job insecurity.

Here, we tackle this categorization problem by using a longitudinal design in which behaviors and stressors are measured over time. Specifically, we differentiate between coping that minimizes the experience of job insecurity (i.e., proactive coping), and coping that minimizes its negative consequences (i.e., reactive coping). As a measure of negative consequences, we focus on psychological strain, which has been related to job insecurity in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research (De Witte et al., 2016). In the current study, we measured weekly amounts of coping, perceived job insecurity, and psychological strain across a time period of five weeks. This enabled us to examine proactive coping as the antecedent of change in job insecurity, and reactive coping as a moderator between job insecurity and change in psychological strain.

Our proactive coping hypotheses are built upon Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptual framework of proactive coping. This framework indicates that proactive coping can be divided into five components: Recognition, initial appraisal, preliminary coping, elicitation and use of feedback, and resource accumulation. These components are argued to diminish the development of potential stressors. In the current study, we have translated the first four of these conceptual components into proactive coping behaviors that may be beneficial in the context of potential job insecurity. Consequently, we expected that the amounts of weekly career planning, scenario-thinking, career consultation, networking, and reflection relate negatively to job insecurity change. The fifth component of proactive coping, resource accumulation, denotes that the more resources one possesses, the likelier it is that one will be successful in the other components of proactive coping. Resources refer to objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual (e.g., money, time, a social network). For example, it may be easier to recognize a situation that may develop into a future stressor, when one has an extensive social network to receive information from. Given that resources are the result of continuous effort over a prolonged period of time, the amount of resources one has should be relatively stable during the five-week timespan of our study. Therefore, we examined resources as a between-person moderator variable with the expectation that workers with a higher amount resources, are more successful in their

proactive coping behaviors than workers with a lower amount of resources.

Further, we propose that the difference between proactive and reactive coping lies in its timing and function and not so much in the type of behaviors. Therefore, we explored whether the behaviors discussed to formulate our proactive coping hypotheses, may in fact also be useful in a reactive manner by moderating the relationship between job insecurity and psychological strain. We tested both this reactive coping model and the prior discussed proactive model for four types of job insecurity: Cognitive quantitative job insecurity, affective quantitative job insecurity, cognitive qualitative job insecurity, and affective qualitative job insecurity (cf. De Witte et al., 2010; Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018).

METHODS

Context, participants, and procedure

We collected weekly survey data through five online surveys in June and July 2020 in the Netherlands. During this time the country was approaching the end of the first wave of COVID-19 infections. Restrictions imposed in March 2020 to prevent the spread of the virus were somewhat eased (e.g., schools, shops, hotels, and restaurants reopened), but several restrictions remained in place (e.g., keeping 1.5m distance, ban on large events). We targeted a broad pool of workers from all sectors and educational levels to enhance the generalizability of our findings. We recruited participants via social media, social media advertisements, and organizational newsletters. Participants received: a) a digital voucher of €5 for completing the first survey, b) a digital voucher of €15 for completing all five surveys, and c) recommendations about coping with job insecurity after the study was concluded. The final sample comprised of 266 participants of which 248 filled in all five surveys (93.2%). The resulting final dataset consisted of 1.280 weekly surveys. Participants had an average age of 39.8 years ($SD = 11.8$) and 72.9% was female. Regarding highest level of education, 7.5% finished high school, 15.0% finished vocational education, 39.1% had a bachelor's degree, 36.8% had a master's degree, and 1.5% had a doctorate degree. Regarding contract type, 51.1% had a permanent employment contract, 27.1% had a temporary employment contract, 12.4% had a flexible contract, and 9.4% were self-employed.

Measures

The baseline measures consisted of demographics and resources. We measured resources with three items based on Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) three main resources (i.e., time, money, and social support), supplemented with four resources that are expected to be accumulated through long-term use of the coping behaviors measured in this study. The total measure existed of seven items ($\alpha = .72$), with each item referring to one resource (e.g., "I have a clear image of my career goals and how to achieve them"). Responses were measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

All weekly measures were adapted to suit a frequency response format and started with "Could you please indicate, how often you, in the prior week…". Respondents answered on 7-point scales, ranging from "(almost) never" to "(almost) always". We measured cognitive quantitative job insecurity ($\alpha = .84$-$.89$) with three items adapted from Vander Elst et al. (2014), cognitive qualitative job insecurity ($\alpha = .70$-$.80$) with three items adapted from Hellgren et al. (1999), affective quantitative job insecurity ($\alpha = .89$-$.93$) with two items adapted from Hellgren et al. (1999) and one item adapted from Vander Elst et al. (2014), and affective qualitative job insecurity

(α = .84-.90) with three items from Låstad et al. (2015) and one item adapted of Vander Elst et al. (2014). Measures for career planning (α = .95), career consultation (α =.76-84), and networking (α =.92-.95) were adapted from Strauss et al. (2012) research on proactive career behaviors. Measures for scenario thinking (α = .86-.90) and reflection (α = .84-.90) were adapted from Bindl et al.'s (2012) research on proactive goal regulation. Lastly, we measured psychological strain (α =.84-.90) with eight items adapted from Kalliath et al. (2004).

RESULTS

Proactive coping. While we expected that weekly proactive coping behaviors would minimize the experience of job insecurity, multilevel path modelling results showed that weekly proactive coping was generally related to an increase in job insecurity. This trend was visible for all five proactive coping behaviors. That is, career planning, scenario-thinking, career consultation, networking, and reflection were all positively related to job insecurity at the within-person level. Notably, we found this positive effect of proactive coping for all types of job insecurity (i.e., cognitive quantitative insecurity, affective quantitative insecurity, and affective qualitative insecurity), except for cognitive qualitative job insecurity. For the latter, we found the expected negative effect of most of the proactive coping behaviors on job insecurity. Additionally, resources did not moderate the relationship between weekly proactive coping and job insecurity for any of the coping or job insecurity types. Finally, replicating earlier findings in the job insecurity literature, we found that all types of job insecurity were related to an increase in psychological strain.

As a supplemental analysis, we tested our within-level hypotheses at the between-level. We found that all proactive coping behaviors were positively related to all job insecurity types, again with the exception of cognitive qualitative job insecurity. Thus, individuals who generally engage more in proactive coping, generally experience more job insecurity. Next, we found that these relationships were moderated by resources: For workers high in resources, the positive relationship between proactive coping behaviors and job insecurity was weaker than for workers low in resources. Thus, at the between-individual level resources seem to attenuate the positive relationship between proactive coping and job insecurity. Further, we found that all types of job insecurity were positively related to psychological strain. Lastly, we found a moderated mediation effect for all five coping types, which implies that the positive indirect relationship between coping behaviors and strain via job insecurity was stronger for workers with relatively few resources.

Reactive coping. At the within-level, we found that none of the coping behaviors moderated the relationship between any of the job insecurity types and psychological strain, with two exceptions. First, career planning moderated the relationship between affective quantitative job insecurity and psychological strain: The positive relationship between insecurity and strain was weaker for workers who scored relatively high rather than low on career planning. Second, career consultation moderated the relationship between cognitive qualitative job insecurity and psychological strain: The positive relationship between insecurity and strain was stronger for workers who scored relatively high rather than low on career consultation.

At the between-level, we found that career planning, career consultation, networking, and reflection, moderated the relationships between job insecurity and strain. We found this moderating effect for all job insecurity types except affective qualitative job insecurity. The positive relationship between job insecurity and psychological strain was stronger and generally significant for workers who scored relatively high on these coping behaviors, while this relationship was weaker and generally not significant for workers who scored relatively low on these coping behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Guided by Aspinwall and Taylor's (1997) conceptual framework, we adopted a prevention-focused perspective to uncover if and how workers can minimize the experience of job insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we aimed to increase our conceptual knowledge of proactive and reactive coping by exploring whether weekly proactive coping can also function in a reactive manner to buffer the negative consequences of job insecurity. Lastly, we explored whether the relationships we investigated on the within-person level (i.e., over time), rendered similar results at the between-person level (i.e., between individuals).

Major findings and theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the job insecurity and coping literature in four ways. First, we shed light on the short-term consequences of proactive coping with job insecurity at the within-person level. While we expected that weekly proactive coping behaviors would decrease the development of job insecurity, the results showed that weekly proactive coping were, in fact, related to an increase in job insecurity. One possible explanation is that proactive coping may not have been 'wise' in the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, since proactivity may not be 'wise' in contexts that are not ready for change (Parker et al., 2019). Alternatively, it may require more time for the positive consequences of proactive coping to become visible. Indeed, some authors have suggested proactive coping may have adverse effects in the short term due to consumption of resources, but beneficial effects in the long term due to gain of new resources (Bolino et al., 2010; Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2015). Another reason why positive results of proactive coping may need more time to establish, lies in its definition: Proactive coping refers to future-oriented coping that has not only the aim to manage stressors, but also the aim to detect stressors early (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Possibly, participants felt more insecure after their proactive coping behaviors, because it made them more aware of potential threats to their job and job features. While this awareness is vital for successful proactive coping, job insecurity may not be decreased until individuals actually succeed in influencing these potential threats.

Second, we contributed to unraveling the (in)difference between proactive and reactive coping. Conceptually, the difference between proactive and reactive coping lies in their aims: Proactive coping aims to reduce the development of a potential stressor, while reactive coping is aimed at minimizing negative consequences of a stressor (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). However, our results indicated that the measured coping behaviors achieved neither of these aims. We argue that the difference between proactive and reactive coping is purely conceptual, while coping success, regardless of its reactive or proactive nature, is an empirical matter.

Third, we added to existing knowledge about the role of resources in the proactive coping process. We found that for workers high in resources, the positive indirect relationship between proactive coping and psychological strain was weaker than for workers low in resources. Thus, our results indicate that proactive coping can be more harmful for individuals with relatively few resources. This is in line with Hobfoll's (1989) concept of loss spirals: Individuals who lack resources, are most vulnerable to additional losses.

Fourth, our study underlines the value of differentiating between four job insecurity types, for they rendered different results. While weekly proactive coping was generally positively related to all types of job insecurity, we found the opposite negative relationships between proactive coping and cognitive qualitative job insecurity. Results indicated that this type of job insecurity was experienced most strongly, but also that proactive coping can mitigate this amount. Possibly,

proactive coping can be 'wise' in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic for this specific type of job insecurity. These results illustrate that dichotomies consisting of either quantitative and qualitative, or cognitive and affective, may not suffice to understand the full job insecurity experience.

Limitations and future research recommendations

One limitation of our study was the 5-week timespan of our data collection. More within-person research with longer time lags is necessary to investigate our suggestion that proactive coping may reduce the development of job insecurity in the long term. We advise future researchers to measure the amount of resources at several timepoints, at least one month apart, in order to investigate whether proactive coping first consumes resources, before it results in new resources.

Second, we investigated proactive coping with the assumption that 'more is better', while possibly, individuals may benefit more from a little proactive coping for a prolonged period of time. This way, individuals still gather information and may manage potential stressors, without depleting their resources too much. Proactive coping may also backfire when applied too intensively. For example, it does not seem unlikely that well-intended behaviors of scenario-thinking, reflection, and career planning may result in rumination, absorption in the past, or anxieties about the future.

Practical implications

While our study could not provide unequivocal evidence for positive outcomes of proactive coping, extant research has shown that the overall tendency to act proactively is related to beneficial outcomes (Fuller & Marler, 2009), also in the job insecurity context (Koen & Parker, 2020). Moreover, we suggest proactive coping may decrease job insecurity in the long term, because it takes time to build resources and influence threats. Therefore, it is advisable not to cease proactive behaviors to prevent temporary discomfort, but to keep engaging in proactive behaviors while trying to minimize discomfort (e.g., by emotional coping or recovery strategies).

Conclusion

Our study showed that weekly proactive coping behaviors were generally related to an increase in experienced job insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, we did find that proactive coping can decrease cognitive qualitative job insecurity, which illustrates different types of job insecurity may require different preventive strategies. Additionally, we found proactive coping to be more harmful for individuals with relatively few resources. We hope that future research will further investigate at which time span and under what circumstances proactive coping works best to succeed in managing potential threats.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)