Introduction: Facts and fables in work psychology: a critical interrogation and future proofing of job insecurity, precarious employment and burnout

Nele De Cuyper, Eva Selenko, Martin Euwema, & Wilmar Schaufeli

---

WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

There is much to learn when things go wrong at work. If so, work psychology has a bright future ahead. Job insecurity and precarious employment are at an all-time high (OECD, 2022) so it seems, and burnout has been advanced as the new worker pandemic in the popular press and media (Schaufeli et al., this volume). With this book, our aim is to fuel learning in work psychology in two ways: through a *critical interrogation* of what is known and through *future proofing* of the field of work psychology in general, and the areas of *job insecurity*, *precarious employment and burnout* in particular.

A *critical interrogation* implies looking back at the body of knowledge that is already there. Looking back is essential. With a discipline that is so intertwined with people's daily lives, we need to take stock of what we know and how we can use this knowledge; indeed, work psychology is about understanding *and* improving employee health and well-being. *Future proofing* implies looking ahead. The world of work is rapidly changing in response to – just to name a few – digitalization, globalization and automatization, and following a series of impactful events – such as the Covid pandemic(s) (Guest & Isaksson, this volume; Probst et al., this volume). An obvious but fundamental question then is whether the "typical" occupational health concepts, themes and theories are still relevant. This question is not new (e.g., Gallagher & Sverke, 2005, in their article "Contingent employment contracts: Are existing theories still relevant?") yet it certainly has become more pressing. Looking back and looking ahead both serve to disentangle facts from fables: unlike facts, fables typically narrate a story that is intuitively appealing and brought to

1

life through anecdotic rather than strong empirical evidence. Those stories are inherently meaningful as they give an interpretation about what is happening in society and what is preoccupying people. Or else, "at times of crisis, myths have historical importance" (Winston Churchill). Yet, there are also risks involved, for example, when harmful or inferior interventions are based solely on stories rather than on evidence, or worse even, when proper interventions are contested in spite of the evidence. A blunt example are the recent conspiracy theories around the Covid-19 pandemic and associated fears and concerns around vaccination (De Witte et al., 2021). Looking back and forward helps to uncover the unfolding evidence, what is known and not (yet) known.

We focus upon three themes in particular: job insecurity, precarious employment and burnout. Those themes are deliberately chosen. At the highest aggregate level, work psychology connects work characteristics to worker well-being and strain (De Witte, 2005a). Job insecurity and precarious employment are work characteristics and burnout is a particularly strong indicator of strain; all with strong resonance in today's world of work. *Job insecurity* concerns the employee's perception that one's job is at risk (De Witte, 1999, 2005b; De Witte et al., 2016): essentially, subjective job insecurity implies that the employee does not know what will happen in the near future. *Precarious employment* is typically portrayed as an objective form of job insecurity (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006; De Witte & Näswall, 2003; Sverke et al., this volume): it refers to employment that deviates from the standard, permanent open-ended labor contract. Job insecurity and precarious employment are obviously related and difficult to disentangle and they both have particular significance against the background of the growing gig economy. *Burnout* is "a work-related state of mental exhaustion which is characterized by extreme tiredness, cognitive and emotional impairment and mental distancing" (Schaufeli et al., 2020). It has attracted much attention, particularly among health care workers (Vandenbroeck et al., 2017) and even more so in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Shoss et al., 2022). Burnout is also high on the policy agenda (e.g., Eurofound, 2018). The book is focused but not limited to those themes; it provides a broader view on other work psychology themes such as workplace bullying and the connection between work and other areas of life (e.g., perceived immigrant threat, voting behavior), and on interventions in the broader area of work psychology.

So, why this book now? Because it seems the right time to look back and to look forward and to disentangle facts from fables and fiction in the area of job insecurity and burnout. But also, it is the right time to honor the career of one of the scholarly leaders of the field of work psychology: Hans De Witte. Hans has spent his entire career studying work psychology topics, particularly focusing on job insecurity, precarious employment and burnout. However, his expertise also extended to related topics such as workplace bullying and

political attitudes. He is a strong and persistent advocate of facts above fables – for instance, no one dares to suggest that job insecurity may have beneficial effects in his presence, or if they do, they do so only once. The book is being issued as a liber amicorum of colleagues and friends that brings together a group of experts who have worked with Hans throughout his academic career. Remarkably, members of this group originate from many countries and reflect Hans' strong international orientation. With this liber amicorum dedicated to Hans, his academic comrades aim to trigger debate and inspire a new generation.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK?

The book is structured along five parts, including 13 chapters. Some chapters are more conceptual, others theoretical, while others provide or summarize empirical evidence (Table 0.1). In *Part I*, three chapters look back at what is known about job insecurity, each with a specific lens: conceptual, empirical and theoretical. At the conceptual level, *Fischmann, Corbeanu, Spinu, Sulea and Iliescu* describe how the notion of job insecurity may appear as conceptually clear and straightforward but, in fact, it is not (see also De Witte, 1999, 2005b): there are different dimensions and interpretations of job insecurity. This easily leads to the jingle-jangle fallacy in which concepts and measures are not aligned, which is typical for the broader field of work psychology. Their contribution offers a valuable overview of the different measurements of job insecurity and their definitions, which will be indicative to the senior as well as more uninitiated reader in the area of job insecurity. At the empirical level, *Tomas and Maslić Seršić* summarize the current evidence on the relationship between job insecurity and performance. This relationship is hotly debated (De Cuyper et al., 2020; Nikolova et al., 2022; Piccoli et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that job insecurity may motivate employees to work harder, for example in view of job preservation. However, the strength of opinions is not matched with evidence; overall, job insecurity is bad. But still, this fable is persistent, perhaps as a way to legitimize growing insecurity in organizations. This is an illustrative example of how fables may harm employees: HR policies that are built on the idea that job insecurity has motivating potential may exhaust employees, could hamper goal achievement, and ultimately may harm the organization. At the level of theory, *De Cuyper, Van Hootegem and Roll* argue that job insecurity research is perhaps not the strongest area when it comes to theory use and conceptual development: job insecurity research typically borrows theories from related fields, sometimes in an ad hoc fashion and without much depth. On a slightly more positive note, this also means much potential for theory development and elaboration.

In *Part II*, three chapters look ahead and discuss the future of job insecurity research against the overall rise in different types of non-standard employment. Perhaps the most fundamental question is whether there is a future for non-standard employment; a question that is addressed most sharply in the chapter "Is job insecurity still relevant?" by *Probst, Selenko and Shoss*. Their conclusion is that insecurity certainly remains relevant, but needs to be future-proofed against the background of non-standard work. Non-standard work may rapidly become the norm, and has been so for most people and industries across the globe. The implication is that workers may not worry about their job – they know that jobs are not forever anyway. This does not mean that they have embraced insecurity as a fact of life: they may not worry about their job but about work in general. *Guest and Isaksson* continue along this line, they agree with Probst et al. (this volume) that "job" insecurity may not be the key issue for many workers, but other types of insecurity certainly are. They outline how and in which ways the psychological contract needs rethinking in view of job insecurity (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006): what meaning, if any, has the psychological contract for gig workers, self-employed or for those for whom employment is mediated by an algorithm? *Sverke, Ferré Hernandez, Tanimoto, Hellgren and Näswall* start from the apparent paradox that non-standard and otherwise insecure workers are most in need of union protection, yet they are less likely to be members of a union (De Witte et al., 2008). There is no easy way out of this paradox; unions deliberately strive to protect employee rights, including security, but they seem to define employees in a "standard" fashion that is perhaps too exclusive and may ultimately undermine unionization. The authors call for a broader and non-standard interpretation of who are core union members, or perhaps a specific union for non-standard employees.

Part III shifts the focus from job insecurity and precarious employment to burnout, with another three chapters. *Schaufeli, Hakanen and Shimazu* address six "burning issues in burnout research", related to the definition, diagnosis, assessment, prevalence, causes and interventions. In doing so, they dismantle two of the most persistent burnout fables. One fable that is heavily fed by popular media is that there is an ongoing burnout epidemic: there is not or at least not as far as empirical evidence is concerned. That is not necessarily good news, it simply means that burnout has always been there. What the fable shows is that burnout has perhaps become more visible in society and is less seen as a taboo or a signal of weakness. Another fable is that burnout is not very different from depression. This is a popular belief and may wrongfully lead to the conclusion that structural changes in job and work design and in HR policy may not prevent or buffer burnout. In this respect, the study by *Vander Elst, Vandenbroeck and Godderis* convincingly shows that the work context does matter: organizational communication and procedural justice attenuated

the relationship between job insecurity and burnout (see also Vander Elst et al., 2010). *Antonissen, Eertmans, Van den Brande and L. Van den Broeck* address another popular belief, namely that the level of burnout symptoms differs between generations. As such there is virtually no proof for this. Yet they show that the level of burnout symptoms is higher among younger workers compared with older workers. Also risk factors differ: factors tied to the job seem to form a risk for younger workers and factors tied to the organization for older workers. This naturally leads to the suggestion to invest in the development of age-sensitive HR-strategies.

In *Part IV*, we turn to interventions. As has already been said, work psychology is not only about understanding employee health and well-being, but also about *improving* employee health and well-being, and yet, carefully designed interventions are scarce, as demonstrated for example by Schaufeli et al. (this volume) in the context of burnout. The two chapters in this section provide tools and hands-on advice on how to design successful interventions. *Nielsen and Brough* highlight the critical role of participation processes in all interventions that aim to make structural changes in the workplace, much in line with the evidence provided by Vander Elst et al. (in this volume). They discuss challenges in worker participation in organizational interventions. *A. Van den Broeck and Vansteenkiste* make a theory-based case to use motivational interviewing to bring the group of unemployed individuals back to the labor market (see also Van der Vaart et al., 2022). Motivational interviewing in itself may not be new, yet it is applied to an entirely different target group – the unemployed and particularly those with a fairly large distance to the labor market – for whom it could have particular relevance.

Part V finally shows that method matters in addressing fables and popular beliefs with illustrations coming from different areas: fables often continue to exist because we do not challenge and test them, or because there are many pitfalls when attempting to do so. The chapter by *Billiet and Meuleman* delves into the topic of perceived immigrant threat, a specific ethic threat perception often studied in the form of anti-immigrant sentiments or right-wing voting (see Selenko & De Witte, 2021; Van Hootegem et al., 2021, for studies in the area of work psychology). Work psychological articles often justify their enquiry of political effects of work arguing that right-wing sentiments would be on the rise. While this assumption may reflect a popular discourse, it is unclear whether such ethnic threat perceptions are *really* on the rise. *Billiet and Meuleman* take a longitudinal representative Belgian dataset, including six measurement occasions between 1995 and 2020. Immigrant threat is surprisingly difficult to investigate across time as there are challenging methodological issues around non-response, non-representativeness, biased answering, and measurement change which can easily distort the results. The authors illustrate how to deal with those issues. Their conclusion is a hopeful one: perceived

immigrant threat decreased slightly in Belgium over the last 25 years. *Baillien and Notelaers* make a convincing case that lack of social support and workplace bullying are related, yet distinct phenomena as opposed to the belief that lack of social support and workplace bullying are tautological. While this may seem a conceptual and purely academic debate, it does have serious implications. Lack of social support is not the same as workplace bullying but should instead be seen as an antecedent. Hence, facilitating social support can be an important leverage in the prevention of workplace bullying.

So, how to read this book? We structured the book by topic: job insecurity and precarious unemployment in *Parts I* and *II*, burnout in *Part III*, interventions in *Part IV*, and concluding with a view on methods in research applied to perceived immigrant threat and workplace bullying. But an alternative grouping – and reading – other than by topic is also possible as displayed in Table 0.1. Some readers may prefer to focus upon conceptual or theoretical development, others on the empirical body of knowledge. Whatever reading approach is chosen, it fits with Hans' legacy: Hans has delved into different topics, but has also been an advocate of robust conceptualization and rigorous methodology, and has brought theory to the fore in job insecurity research.

FOR WHOM?

The target audience are researchers across all career stages. Early career scholars and PhD students may use this book to get a view on the breadth of the three topic clusters – job insecurity, precarious employment and burnout – and they may find inspiration for new topics and questions and tips for stronger theorizing, accurate methods and well-designed interventions. More established scholars may find the critical perspectives helpful to self-examine and to see potential assumptions based on fables in their own research lines.

But above all, this book is for you, Hans!

Table 0.1   *Overview of the book*

Chapters and authors	Facts, fables, future proofing	Conceptual	Empirical	Theoretical
PART I. Job insecurity: Looking back				
Job insecurity, job security, job future ambiguity? Oh my… a new step towards conceptual clarity Gabriel Fischmann, Andreea Corbeanu, Roxana Spinu, Coralia Sulea, & Dragos Iliescu	Fable Job insecurity is conceptually clear	✓		
Job insecurity and job performance: Why do job-insecure employees not perform better? Jasmina Tomas & Darja Maslić Seršić	Fable Job insecurity motivates workers to perform		✓	
Borrowing trouble? A debate on how social exchange theory is used and can be used in job insecurity research Nele De Cuyper, Anahí Van Hootegem, & Lara C. Roll	Fact Job insecurity research is atheoretical (or in any case not very strong in theory)			✓
PART II. Job insecurity and precarious employment: Looking ahead!				
Is job insecurity still relevant? Unpacking the meaning of "job" and "insecurity" in today's economy Tahira Probst, Eva Selenko, & Mindy Shoss	Future-proof Work insecurity instead of job insecurity	✓		
Is there a future for research on job insecurity and the psychological contract in a changing world of work? David Guest & Kerstin Isaksson		✓		✓

Chapters and authors	Facts, fables, future proofing	Conceptual	Empirical	Theoretical
Can unions represent the interests of insecure workers? Magnus Sverke, Isabelle Ferré Hernandez, Anna S. Tanimoto, Johnny Hellgren, & Katharina Näswall	Future-proof Towards specific or inclusive unions		✓	
PART III. Burnout: Contemporary issues				
Burning issues in burnout research Wilmar Schaufeli, Jari Hakanen, & Akihito Shimazu	Fable Burnout is some sort of depression Fable There is a burnout pandemic	✓	✓	
Contextual factors moderating the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and burnout: A plea for a multilevel approach Tinne Vander Elst, Sofie Vandenbroeck, & Lode Godderis	Fact Organizations also have responsibility in the prevention of burnout		✓	
Age differences in levels and risk factors of burnout in three European countries: a contribution from consultancy practice Dirk Antonissen, Audrey Eertmans, Inge Van den Brande, & Lore Van den Broeck	Fact There are age differences in burnout		✓	
PART IV. Interventions: Getting people on board				
The tricky issue of worker participation in organizational interventions within Occupational Health Psychology Karina Nielsen & Paula Brough	Fact Participation is crucial (but challenging in all organizational interventions)	✓		✓

Chapters and authors	Facts, fables, future proofing	Conceptual	Empirical	Theoretical
Motivating the unemployed: How motivational interviewing may help to tailor interventions to different unemployment profiles Anja Van den Broeck & Maarten Vansteenkiste	Future-proof Motivational interviewing to bring the unemployed back to the labor market		✓	
PART V. Methods matter!				
Methodological challenges for studying trends in perceived immigrant threat Jaak Billiet & Bart Meuleman	Fable Perceived immigrant threat increased in the past decades		✓	
What's in a name! The thin line between being bullied and lacking social support: Are both "just" the same? Elfi Baillien & Guy Notelaers	Fable Workplace bullying is little more than lack of social support	✓	✓	

REFERENCES

De Cuyper, N., & De Witte, H. (2006). The impact of job insecurity and contract type on attitudes, well-being and behavioral reports: A psychological contract perspective. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 79(3), 395–409. https://doi.org/10.1348/096317905X53660

De Cuyper, N., Schreurs, B., De Witte, H., & Selenko, E. (2020). Impact of job insecurity on job performance: Introduction. *Career Development International*, 25(3), 221–228. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-06-2020-332

De Witte, H. (1999). Job insecurity and psychological well-being: Review of the literature and exploration of some unresolved issues. European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 8(2), 155–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/135943299398302

De Witte, H. (2005a). Definitie: Wat is "arbeidspsychologie"? [Definition: What is "workpsychology"?] [Student handbook].

De Witte, H. (2005b). Job insecurity: Review of the international literature on definitions, prevalence, antecedents and consequences. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 31(4), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v31i4.200

De Witte, H., & Näswall, K. (2003). "Objective" vs "subjective" job insecurity: Consequences of temporary work for job satisfaction and organizational commitment in four European countries. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 24(2), 149–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X03024002002

De Witte, H., Pienaar, J., & De Cuyper, N. (2016). Review of 30 years of longitudinal studies on the association between job insecurity and health and well-being: Is there

causal evidence? *Australian Psychologist*, 51(1), 18–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12176

De Witte, H., Roll, L., & Van Hootegem, A. (2021). On the consequences of the corona crisis for occupational insecurity, political powerlessness and beliefs in conspiracy. *Gedrag & Organisatie*, 34(3), 382–406. https://doi.org/10.5117/GO2021.3.005.WITT

De Witte, H., Sverke, M., Van Ruysseveldt, J., Goslinga, S., Chirumbolo, A., Hellgren, J., & Näswall, K. (2008). Job insecurity, union support and intentions to resign membership: A psychological contract perspective. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 14(1), 85–103. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959680107086113

Eurofound (2018). *Burnout in the workplace: A review of data and policy responses in the EU.* Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Gallagher, D. G., & Sverke, M. (2005). Contingent employment contracts: Are existing employment theories still relevant? *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 26(2), 181–203. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X05051513

Nikolova, I., Stynen, D., Van Coillie, H., & De Witte, H. (2022). Job insecurity and employee performance: Examining different types of performance, rating sources and levels. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 31(5), 713–726. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2021.2023499

OECD (2022). *OECD Labor Force Statistics 2021*. OECD Publishing: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/177e93b9-en

Piccoli, B., Reisel, W. D., & De Witte, H. (2021). Understanding the relationship between job insecurity and performance: Hindrance or challenge effect? *Journal of Career Development*, 48(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845319833

Schaufeli, W. B., Desart, S., & De Witte, H. (2020). Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) - Development, validity and reliability. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17(24), 9495. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249495

Selenko, E., & De Witte, H. (2021). How job insecurity affects political attitudes: Identity threat may play a role. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 70(3), 1267–1294. https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12275

Shoss, M., Van Hootegem, A., Selenko, E., & De Witte, H. (2022). The job insecurity of others: On the role of perceived national job insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Economic and Industrial Democracy.* https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X221076176

Van der Vaart, L., Van den Broeck, A., Rothmann, S., & De Witte, H. (2022). Motivational profiles in unemployment: a self-determination perspective. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10.

Van Hootegem, A., Van Hootegem, A., Selenko, E., & De Witte, H. (2021). Work is political: Distributive injustice as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between job insecurity and political cynicism. *Political Psychology*, 43(2), 375–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12766

Vandenbroeck, S., Van Gerven, E., De Witte, H., Vanhaecht, K., & Godderis, L. (2017). Burnout in Belgian physicians and nurses. *Occupational Medicine*, 67(7), 546–554. https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqx126

Vander Elst, T., Baillien, E., De Cuyper, N., & De Witte, H. (2010). The role of organizational communication and participation in reducing job insecurity and its negative association with work-related well-being. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 31(2), 249–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X09358372