

Who Feels Insecure in Europe? Predicting Job Insecurity from Background Variables

Katharina Näswall

Stockholm University

Hans De Witte

Catholic University of Leuven

Along with the increased flexibilization of the labour market in Europe, there has been a change in the permanence and security of employment. Job insecurity is constituted by a subjectively experienced threat of having to give up one's job sooner than one would like. The experience of job insecurity has been linked to decreasing well-being, negative attitudes towards one's job and organization, and reluctance to stay with the organization. The present study investigates what groups experience higher levels of job insecurity than others. Survey data from four European countries (Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden) were used to determine what characterizes individuals who experience high levels of job insecurity. The results show that employees in jobs characterized by manual labour, contingent workers, and to some extent older workers and those with lower levels of education, experience higher levels of job insecurity.

Keywords: demographics, European context, generalizability, job insecurity, predictors

Introduction

Along with the intensified global competition, employment has become unstable and less secure. Increased demands for flexible organizations, with less expenses and higher gains, lead to the use of downsizing and temporary contracts to ensure competitiveness. Organizations have had to decrease the size of their workforce, or

conduct large reorganizations, in order to stay on the market (Kozlowski et al., 1993). This decreases the predictability for the employees. They can no longer expect to remain in the organization as long as they would like. The result of this is insecure employment and perceptions of job insecurity among the employees (Hartley et al., 1991; OECD, 1997). The perception of job insecurity has been an increasing concern for researchers during the last decades, as it may have detrimental consequences for both the individual and the organization (Ashford et al., 1989; Hartley et al., 1991; Hellgren et al., 1999).

This study aims at expanding the previous understanding of the experience of job insecurity by investigating whether background variables can facilitate the prediction of who will experience high levels of job insecurity. Few studies have concentrated on this issue (one exception is van Vuuren et al., 1991). Even if many studies include relationships between job insecurity and one or two demographic variables in the descriptive part of their study, the focus in these studies is almost always on some other research question. This is a pity since the knowledge of possible predictors of job insecurity has the potential to assist in alleviating the negative consequences for those who are most affected by feelings of job insecurity. To identify how such negative experiences can be reduced is important not only from a theoretical point of view, but also for the practical consequences that the experience of job insecurity has been documented to have. By identifying groups that are more vulnerable to job insecurity, it may be possible to at least partly prevent strong feelings of insecurity in the future.

In this study we investigate the association of background variables such as age, gender, family situation, employment status and union membership with the degree of threat experienced against the current employment – job insecurity. Data from four different European countries are used in order to widen the picture of who is more likely to experience heightened levels of job insecurity in Europe. The use of data from four different countries provides us with the opportunity to investigate how findings generalize across countries. We do not propose that the relations between demographics and job insecurity should differ between countries; rather, the aim is to broaden the understanding of the extent to which the influence of demographic factors on perceived job insecurity might be generalized.

Job Insecurity

Job insecurity can be defined as the worry a person feels about the future of her or his employment situation (Davy et al., 1997). It has also been defined as the sense of threat to the continuation of her or his employment an employee feels (Heaney et al., 1994). The feeling of job insecurity is a subjective experience, differing among employees in the same objective work situation (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984; Hartley et al., 1991; Sverke and Hellgren, 2002). It is also important to note that job insecurity is defined as the experience of a threat of *involuntary* job loss (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984); a person who does not particularly care about the job loss will, by this definition, not experience job insecurity, nor suffer its consequences.

In this study we focus on the *subjective* experience of job insecurity. Several authors have previously defined job insecurity as an objective experience (e.g. Büssing, 1999; Ferrie et al., 1998), where employees in contexts characterized by uncertainty, for instance high levels of unemployment or working in a downsizing organization, are described as insecure. There is no doubt that the perception of job insecurity (i.e. the subjective experience) is linked to the objective context in which the employees work (Büssing, 1999), but there is also evidence of the subjective experience of job insecurity occurring in contexts where there is no objective threat of unemployment (Rosenblatt and Ruvio, 1996; for further discussion of the difference between subjective and objective job insecurity, see De Witte and Näswall, this issue, pp. 147–86). Following the bulk of research (for a review, see Sverke and Hellgren, 2001) we focus on the subjective perception of job insecurity in this study since the way individuals interpret their environment affects how they react to it. Previous studies have linked the subjective experience of job insecurity to a number of negative outcomes (for meta-analysis results, see Sverke et al., 2002). Thus, the present study investigates predictors of subjective job insecurity.

The mere anticipation of the possible occurrence of a stressful event may become a stressor (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). A situation becomes stressful when the individual perceives that handling the situation would demand more resources than she feels she has available (Jacobson, 1991; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Job insecurity has been described as such a stressor, where the individual

feels that she does not possess the necessary abilities or powers to make sure that her job is not terminated against her wishes. Thus, as for any other stressor, the tension caused by job insecurity may induce strain (Klandermans et al., 1991).

A stressor, in this case job insecurity, may affect the individual negatively because she will react to it and try to deal with it. However, the usual coping techniques may be difficult to employ, since the individual does not know for sure what is to come. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) point out that the uncertainty of the situation leaves the individual considering different possibilities, and trying to come to terms with them, without knowing what outcome will become reality. The confusion about the occurrence of an event will, according to Lazarus and Folkman, lead to heightened anxiety and a decrease in well-being and other negative outcomes. Because of this, the perception of job insecurity is expected to negatively affect the individual in that it prompts the individual to try responding to it without knowing exactly what will happen (Jacobson, 1991).

Prolonged stress, i.e. a lingering feeling of job insecurity, is expected to have negative effects on well-being, both physical and mental, something which has been both theoretically suggested and empirically shown in previous research (Ashford et al., 1989; Hartley et al., 1991; Heaney et al., 1994; Hellgren et al., 1999; Sverke and Hellgren, 2002). Studies have repeatedly shown that job insecurity in addition is related to deteriorating work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction (e.g. Arnold and Feldman, 1982; Davy et al., 1997), as well as commitment to the organization and job involvement, which also decreases as job insecurity is more prevalent (e.g. Arnold and Feldman, 1982; Ashford et al., 1989; Kuhnert and Vance, 1992). Organizations would also benefit from being aware of a decreasing intention to stay with the organization, which has been shown to follow on from perceptions of job insecurity (Brockner, 1988; Dekker and Schaufeli, 1995). These negative consequences may lead to loss of core employees, as those who can find employment elsewhere (usually employees valuable to the organization) leave the company for less uncertain conditions. Furthermore, if the company has a reputation of being an uncertain workplace there may be difficulties recruiting new employees (Greenhalgh, 1991).

Individual Differences

Given that the phenomenon of job insecurity is a subjective experience, two employees in the same objective situation may experience different levels of job insecurity, since they may have different perceptions or interpretations of the same situation (Jacobson, 1991). First of all, people who differ in their experience of job insecurity may differ in how severe they experience the threat to be, i.e. how likely they feel it is that they will lose their job. Those who feel more insecure probably feel the threat to be stronger than those reporting lower levels of job insecurity. This may be related to the perception of control the individual perceives she has over the situation (Barling and Kelloway, 1996). Those who perceive that they have more control, or trust their own ability to counteract the threat (Ganster and Murphy, 2000; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), will not feel the threat to be as severe. Second, another factor which influences the experienced level of threat, according to this reasoning, is the perceived severity associated with the realization of the threat (i.e. job loss). Those who perceive it to be a very serious event to lose their job will feel more vulnerable towards that event, and experience more insecurity (Jacobson, 1991). This may be traced to differences in the individual's perceptions of her own vulnerability (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Some individuals perceive themselves to be more vulnerable in the sense that they are not confident they possess those resources that are necessary to deal with the consequences.

These explanations of job insecurity, where the degree of job insecurity experienced depends on the individual's perception of vulnerability and own resources to work against the threat, raise the question whether there are differences in the level of job insecurity experienced between individuals characterized by different demographic characteristics. Different groups may not necessarily have the same perceptions of resources available to them (Frese, 1985), which results in different levels of job insecurity. To further raise our curiosity, there is also evidence of differing reactions to job insecurity. A meta-analysis has shown that the strength of the relation between job insecurity and its outcomes differs, sometimes a lot, between demographic groups (Näswall et al., 2001). We now turn to a closer look at a few common demographic variables that may give rise to different levels of vulnerability and, thus, job insecurity.

Two of the most common demographic variables investigated in research are age and gender. For instance, in a study by Mohr (2000) a strong positive correlation was found between the level of insecurity reported and age, implying that older employees experience higher levels of job insecurity. Hartley et al. (1991) also found that older employees experienced more job insecurity than younger workers. Hence we hypothesize that older employees will feel more job insecurity than those who are younger.

A recent study (Näswall et al., 2001) has shown that men exhibit a stronger relation between the stress of insecure employment and its negative outcomes than women. This may be attributable to the traditional role of men as family supporters, financially, and because of this men will feel more strain when facing the threat of losing their job (Warr, 1987). This may be a sign of higher levels of job insecurity among men, something that has been empirically demonstrated by Kinnunen et al. (1999). Hence it is our hypothesis that men will experience higher levels of job insecurity than women.

Employees with a partner may be expected to be less dependent on their income, since their partner may be able to provide for them in the event of job loss. It has been suggested that those living with someone may also benefit from the social support provided by their family, or partner, which buffers against the experience of job insecurity during times when there is a perceived threat against the continued employment (Lim, 1996). Thus the family situation will affect how much job insecurity the employee experiences. One indicator whether someone is relying on the person's income is whether the employee has children living at home. We hypothesize that those with family responsibility, operationalized as those with children at home, will feel a threat of loss of the job more acutely, and experience higher levels of job insecurity. We also hypothesize that those with a partner will exhibit less job insecurity than those without a partner.

Social status is expected to affect the level of job insecurity experienced. This variable is analogous to the type of work that the person has, such as blue-collar worker, white-collar employee, professional, or manager. It has been suggested that blue-collar workers may be more dependent on their income than white-collar workers and managers (Frese, 1985; Gallie et al., 1998; Kinnunen et al., 1999), and based on this it is reasonable to assume that blue-collar workers experience higher levels of perceived job insecurity than the other

categories of employees. Related to social status is the educational level of the employees. It has been suggested that since non-manual workers usually have a higher educational level, they will not be as vulnerable to job loss as those with lower levels of education (Schaufeli, 1992). The educational level of employees is important since it may affect how many choices they have on the labour market. It seems reasonable to expect that those with less education, and only the lower levels completed, will lack skills and knowledge required for many choices to be available, and therefore be more vulnerable to the experience of job insecurity. Along the lines of this, Hartley et al. (1991) found in one of the studies they report that those with higher levels of education completed experienced less job insecurity. Our hypothesis following on this reasoning is that blue-collar workers, and employees with less education, will experience more job insecurity than white-collar workers, or those with more education, respectively.

We now turn to a look at work-related background variables, such as the hours employees work, and if they are permanently employed or not. Those employees who work part-time may not feel that they are part of the organization, that they are not treated as traditional core workers, to the same extent that those working full-time are, since the part-time type of contract may be used in order to even out work schedules (Barling and Gallagher, 1996; Sverke et al., 2000). This may cause the part-time workers to feel more insecure regarding the permanence of their employment, especially during turbulent times, if they worry that the organization will prioritize their 'real' core workers in a downsizing situation. Along the lines of this, Still (1983) found part-time workers to be less satisfied with their job security than full-time workers. Levanoni and Sales (1990) also found that Canadian part-time employees were less satisfied with their employment security than those working full-time. Hence, we hypothesize that those working part-time will experience more job insecurity than those holding full-time contracts.

Another important aspect of the employment contract is whether there is a time limit set to it. Researchers usually define a contingent worker as someone who lacks a permanent contract, regardless of the subjective perceptions of insecurity (Barker and Christensen, 1998). In this study we have counted as contingent workers those who hold contracts with a time limit. We recognize that there

are several different types of contingent workers (i.e. temporary firm workers, consultants, in-house temporaries, independent contractors, etc.) who may differ in their perceptions of their situation (McLean Parks et al., 1998). However, the definitions imply that contingent workers are not as strongly attached to the organization, and that they are probably more at risk of losing their job during reorganizations. Contingent workers have been found to exhibit higher levels of job insecurity than permanent employees (Sverke et al., 2000). We hypothesize, in agreement with theory and previous research, that those with contingent contracts will exhibit higher levels of job insecurity than permanent workers.

There is some research evidence to suggest that social support will diminish the experience of job insecurity (Armstrong-Stassen, 1993), and lower its negative impact on well-being and work attitudes as well (Lim, 1996). Some aspects of social support may be provided by the union (Armstrong-Stassen, 1993; Dekker and Schaufeli, 1995). Those involved with the union are more likely to benefit from the positive support the union can provide, given that the employees trust the union to stand up for them during hard times. Trade unions can help alleviate the feeling of powerlessness, since they are supposed to speak for the employee (Hartley et al., 1991; Sverke and Hellgren, 2001). When the employee feels she or he can trust the union to prevent job loss, the employee may feel less job insecurity. Based on this we hypothesize that union members will experience lower levels of job insecurity than non-members.

Method

Data Collection

The present study is part of a project with a wider scope, focusing on the role of the union in the new flexible labour market (see Sverke et al., 2001, for more details on the project and data collection). The data used in this study came from separate data collections, resulting in similar data, in four European countries: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. The data from all countries except Italy were collected prior to the initiation of the present project, which explains why some variables are not present in all of these data sets.

The countries participating in the present study were selected because of the individual characteristics of the countries (and because similar data sets were available). These four countries also represent the diversity among European countries regarding union density and the role of the union in society. The Netherlands, for example, has a relatively low rate of unionization at approximately 30 percent of the workforce, whereas more than 80 percent of the workforce in Sweden is affiliated with a union. The rate of unionization in Belgium and Italy is somewhere in the middle, around 40–50 percent (Visser, 1996).

The Belgian data were collected as a postal survey during the period November–December 1998, and the questionnaire was distributed in both the Flemish and French parts of Belgium in a variety of organizations. A total of 3003 questionnaires were sent out to the companies, and 1120 usable questionnaires were returned for an approximate response rate of 37 percent. The mean age of the respondents was 37 years, ranging between 18 and 62 years. The majority of the respondents were men (65 percent).

The data from Italy were collected after the project had started, thus the questionnaire could be more specifically tailored to suit the needs of the project. The collection took place in May and June of 2000, and a total of 476 workers participated, for a response rate of 55 percent. The majority of respondents were men (67 percent), and their age ranged from 19 to 64 years, with a mean of 38 years.

For the Netherlands, we used data collected within a longitudinal panel-survey among members of the largest trade unions affiliated with the National Christian Trade Union Federation, the CNV. The questionnaire we used was from ‘wave 13’ in the survey, collected in the summer of 1999. The response rate for this wave was 50 percent ($N = 99$), based on the 1590 members from the original sample. The respondents consisted of 598 men (75 percent). The mean age of the sample was 44 years, ranging between 16 and 85 years.

The Swedish data were collected from the entire staff of two emergency hospitals during organizational restructuring in the spring of 1998. Questionnaires were mailed to the home addresses of all 2455 employees, followed by two reminder mailings. A total of 1501 usable questionnaires were returned to the research team, for a response rate of 61 percent. The mean age of the respondents

TABLE 1
List of Measures Used in the Studies

Variable	Measurement	Belgium	Italy	Mean (SD) or Proportion	The Netherlands	Sweden
Job insecurity	Five-item scale	2.27 (0.89)	2.6 (0.90)	1.90 (0.73)	1.79 (1.01)	
Age	Age at time of data collection	36.75 (9.3)	37.8 (8.98)	43.7 (7.11)	42.6 (10.3)	
Gender	Men = 0, Women = 1	0.35	0.33	0.25	0.83	
Social status	White-collar/professional = 0, Blue-collar = 1	0.37	0.30	0.47	0.33	
Education	University or higher = 0, High school or lower = 1	0.63	0.31	0.91	–	
Partner	Single = 0, Partner = 1	–	0.65	0.84	0.71	
Children at home	No children = 0, Children = 1	–	0.33	0.55	0.35	
Part-time	Full-time = 0, Part-time employment = 1	0.09	0.07	0.20	0.40	
Contingent work	Permanent = 0, Temporary = 1	0.06	0.11	0.11	0.18	
Union membership	Non-member = 0, Member = 1	0.51	0.63	100	0.92	
<i>N</i>		1013	323	181	1328	

– indicates not present in data set.

was 43 years ranging from 18 to 68 years. The majority (83 percent) of the respondents were women.

Measures

Data were collected on demographics, i.e. age, gender, social status, education and family situation (partner and children), and on work-related background variables, i.e. type of contract (part- or full-time, permanent or temporary) and union membership status. Data have been recoded so that the response categories are comparable across countries. Job insecurity was measured with a five-item scale, based on Ashford et al. (1989) and De Witte (1999). Reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for the scale in the four countries range from .77 to .92, which is satisfactory. Table 1 provides an overview of the measures used, and the scoring of these measures.

Results

Associations

Presented in Table 2 are the correlations between job insecurity and those demographic variables that we propose predict job insecurity.

The Belgian sample exhibited correlations that to a great extent supported the assumptions of the study. Job insecurity was significantly correlated with age, gender, status, education, contingent work and union membership. In fact, the only variable not significantly related to job insecurity was part-time work. Older workers and women, as well as blue-collar workers and especially those with lower education, exhibited higher levels of job insecurity. Those holding contingent contracts also reported more insecurity than those permanently employed. The most curious result was that, contrary to our prediction, union membership was positively related to job insecurity, implying that union members experience higher levels of job insecurity than non-members.

The Italian sample exhibited a pattern of correlations quite different from Belgium. Among the few significant correlations, none contradicted expectations. Four variables correlated significantly with job insecurity – age, education, part-time work and contingent work. This was predicted by theory, according to which women and

TABLE 2
Correlations between Study Variables, and Tests for Differences in Magnitudes of the Correlation between Job Insecurity and the Other Variables in the Four Participating Countries

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Belgium										
1. Age										
2. Gender (women)	-.12*									
3. Social status (blue-collar)	-.02	-.25*								
4. Education (low)	-.9*	-.02	.50*							
5. Partner	-	-	-	-						
6. Children at home	-	-	-	-	-					
7. Part-time work	.03	.37*	-.17*	.00	-	-				
8. Contingent work	-.15	.08*	-.08*	.01	-	-	.03			
9. Union membership	-.04	-.09*	.47*	.28*	-	-	-.10*	-.01		
10. Job insecurity	.07*	.13*	.06*	.14*	-	-	.02	.13*	.18*	
Italy										
1. Age										
2. Gender (women)	-.02									
3. Social status (blue-collar)	-.03	-.22*								
4. Education (low)	.19*	-.10	.37*							
5. Partner	.43*	-.07	.00	.09						
6. Children at home	.11*	-.06	-.08	-.01	.47*					
7. Part-time work	-.06	.14*	.08	.06	-.11*	-.01				
8. Contingent work	-.25*	-.05	.00	.05	-.22*	-.11	.18*			
9. Union membership	.32*	-.06	.20*	.24*	.15*	.02	.01	-.13*		
10. Job insecurity	.12*	.01	.12*	.12*	-.05	-.05	.17*	.10	.02	

The Netherlands

1. Age																					
2. Gender (women)	-.20*																				
3. Social status (blue-collar)	-.10	.15																			
4. Education (low)	-.08	.12	-.01																		
5. Partner	-.03	-.06	.13	-.04																	
6. Children at home	-.66*	-.01	.06	.00	.15*																
7. Part-time work	-.18*	.71*	.14	-.04	-.05	.10															
8. Contingent work	-.13	.03	.08	-.14	.03	.09	.21*														
9. Union membership	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—													
10. Job insecurity	-.06	-.05	.14	.04	.04	.05	-.04	.24*													

Sweden

1. Age																					
2. Gender (women)	.05																				
3. Social status (blue-collar)	-.08*	.03																			
4. Education (low)	—	—	—																		
5. Partner	.01	.03	-.03	—																	
6. Children at home	-.33*	-.04	.01	—	.28*																
7. Part-time work	-.04	.15*	.13*	—	.10*	.23*															
8. Contingent work	-.33*	-.08*	.02	—	-.11*	-.01	.06*														
9. Union membership	.15*	.06*	-.03	—	.08*	.04	-.05	-.24*													
10. Job insecurity	-.07*	-.03	.17*	—	-.06*	-.00	.05	.33*	-.05												

d.f.

3	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
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15.73*	16.56*	9.01*	7.01*	5.08	5.08	1.27	7.02	70.17*	35.50*
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Note: * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed).

— Indicates not present in data set.

^a Test for difference in magnitude of correlation between job insecurity and demographic variables over countries. Significant χ^2 indicates that correlations differ.

those with lower education, as well as part-time and contingent workers will be more susceptible to the experience of job insecurity.

In the Netherlands, only contingent work had a significant correlation with job insecurity, and this was in the predicted direction. No other background variable was significantly correlated with job insecurity.

In Sweden, job insecurity was significantly correlated with age, social status, the presence of a partner and contingent work. The strongest relation of these was the one with contingent work, where job insecurity was experienced to a greater extent among those with a contingent contract. In contrast to the other countries, there was a weak but significant negative relation between age and job insecurity, indicating that younger employees experienced more insecurity than older ones.

In order to be able to generalize these findings across countries we tested whether the patterns of correlations differed. This was done with multi-sample structural equation modelling in Lisrel 8, using maximum-likelihood estimation of the relations in each country. As a first step we freely estimated the relations between job insecurity and age, gender, social status, part-time work and contingent work. In the second step we constrained each relation, one at a time, to have equal magnitudes in all four countries. A significant chi-square value indicates that the magnitudes are not equal in the four countries. The results of these tests are presented at the bottom of Table 2.

Three relations between job insecurity and background variables were found to generalize across countries according to the chi-square test. The magnitudes of correlations between job insecurity and the presence of a partner, children at home and part-time work, respectively, did not differ significantly between countries. The tests for equality of correlation coefficients for the other relations all showed significant chi-square values, which indicates that the magnitudes of relations cannot be generalized over countries.

Predictions

The correlational analyses describe the bivariate relations between job insecurity and the background variables tested. In order to test the hypotheses in a multivariate framework, we went on to perform regression analyses on these variables, with the background vari-

ables predicting job insecurity. Unfortunately, as the results from the correlation analysis show, not all demographic variables were present in all countries. In order to compare the relative influence of each background variable over countries, we limited the multivariate regression analysis to include only those variables common to all data sets. Thus, we attempted to predict the level of job insecurity from age, gender, social status, part-time work and contingent work. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3.

In the Belgian sample, job insecurity was predicted by age, gender, social status and contingent work. Age and gender had a positive relation with job insecurity, suggesting that older employees and women experience higher levels of job insecurity compared to younger employees and men. Social status and job insecurity had a significant positive relationship, suggesting, in accordance with the hypothesis, that those with lower education experience more job insecurity. Supporting the hypotheses, contingent work predicted job insecurity significantly, which indicates that those who work under contingent contracts tend to experience more job insecurity. Altogether the five background variables accounted for 5 percent of the variance in job insecurity.

There were three significant predictors found in the Italian sample. Age, part-time work and contingent work had a significant effect on the experience of job insecurity. Older workers and those working part-time experienced higher levels of job insecurity, as well as those working under temporary contracts. The predictors all taken together accounted for 7 percent of the variance in job insecurity.

In the Dutch data, job insecurity was predicted by social status, part-time work and contingent work. Our hypotheses received support in that blue-collar workers and those with contingent contracts experienced more job insecurity than white-collar workers or those permanently employed, respectively. However, contrary to our prediction, those working full-time seemed to experience more job insecurity than those working part-time. In total, the variables accounted for a slightly larger proportion (8 percent) of the variance in job insecurity compared to Belgium and Italy.

In the Swedish sample, job insecurity was predicted by social status and contingent work. The relation between job insecurity and social status indicates that those who experienced higher levels of job insecurity tended to be blue-collar workers, which supports

TABLE 3
Results of Multiple Regression Analysis (Standardized Coefficients)

Predictor	Belgium	Italy	The Netherlands	Sweden	d.f.	χ^2 ^a
Age	.11*	.16*	-.04	.06	3	6.36
Gender (women)	.17*	.02	.01	-.01	3	18.50**
Social status (blue-collar)	.11*	.12*	.13*	.17*	3	2.28
Part-time work	.04	.14*	-.13*	.01	3	9.21*
Contingent work	.14*	.12*	.25*	.34*	3	28.59**
R^2 adjusted	.05*	.07*	.08*	.14*		

* $p < .05$

^a A significant χ^2 indicates that effect sizes differ in magnitude between countries.

our hypothesis. Also in keeping with the hypotheses, contingent workers reported higher levels of job insecurity than those with a permanent contract. In total, the variables accounted for 14 percent of the variance in job insecurity in the Swedish sample.

We also conducted tests to determine how the results could be generalized across countries, tests similar to those described in the previous section. This was done through multi-sample structural equation modelling in Lisrel 8, using maximum-likelihood estimation procedures. In the first step, the regression coefficients of age, gender, social status, part-time work and contingent work on job insecurity were freely estimated. In the second step, we examined whether the effect sizes could be generalized across countries by imposing equality constraints across samples on the effect of one predictor at a time. Again, the chi-square test was used to determine if the magnitudes of effect sizes differed between countries. The results of these tests are recorded in Table 3. Two of these predictors were shown to have similar impact on the level of job insecurity experienced, namely age and social status. The chi-square values for the other tests were significant, indicating that the magnitudes of effect sizes of gender, part-time work and contingent work differed significantly between countries.

Discussion

Whereas previous research to a great extent examined the relation between job insecurity and its postulated outcomes, the present study investigated to what degree job insecurity is associated with a set of background variables. We proposed hypotheses regarding the relation between job insecurity and each of nine variables, namely, age, gender, social status, education level, partner, children at home, part-time work, contingent work and union membership. We also tested the predictive ability of five variables measured in all four countries, age, gender, social status, part-time work and contingent work. We chose to test this in four different European countries (Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden) in order to investigate the generalizability of the results. We discuss the results, starting with the regression analyses, followed by comments on the correlations, for each variable, to summarize those conclusions that can be drawn from these data. Although this is not a comparative study, we believe there is valuable insight to be gained from

looking at how widespread a certain phenomenon is. The use of four European countries has the potential to provide a wider understanding of how background variables can serve to increase the knowledge of factors influencing job insecurity and thereby increase the knowledge on how the experience of job insecurity can be prevented, in the context of reorganizations, including personnel reductions.

The predictive power of age received some support from the regression analysis. Although the magnitude of effect size of age on job insecurity did not differ significantly between countries, age emerged as a significant predictor of job insecurity in only two of the countries (Belgium and Italy), where older employees reported higher levels of job insecurity. It should nevertheless be noted that the bivariate analysis exhibited significant correlations between age and job insecurity in all countries but the Netherlands. Based on these findings we received partial support for our hypothesis that age influences the experience of job insecurity. The result that older workers experienced more job insecurity is in line with previous research (e.g. van Vuuren et al., 1991; Mohr, 2000), where older employees have been found to exhibit higher levels of job insecurity than younger employees. However, since age had no effect in two of the countries (the Netherlands and Sweden) we have to be careful in interpreting these results as unequivocal support for our hypothesis. One explanation for the lack of predictive power in two of the countries may be that age does not have a linear relation with job insecurity. An alternative hypothesis has been suggested, proposing that employees in the middle age group, i.e. between 30 and 50 years of age, who are more likely to have children and family responsibilities and thus will be more dependent on their income, will express higher levels of job insecurity when their jobs are threatened (De Witte, 1999). This may be one interesting issue for future research to explore further.

We hypothesized that men would experience more job insecurity than women. This was based on the results of a recent meta-analysis where men reacted more negatively to job insecurity (Näswall et al., 2001) and earlier research showing men to experience job insecurity to a greater extent than women (Kinnunen et al., 1999). Our hypothesis was not supported. The effect of gender differed significantly between countries, and in the only sample where gender emerged as a predictor (Belgium), contrary to our hypothesis, women were the ones experiencing more job insecurity. However,

since no other significant relations were obtained in any of the other countries we cannot conclude that gender has much predictive power for experiences of job insecurity. A possible explanation for this may be found in earlier research, which reports that women also experience a higher level of job insecurity when they are the only person bringing in an income in the family (De Witte, 1999). Thus, future studies should take into account whether women and men are responsible for the household income rather than focusing on gender alone.

According to previous research, those employed in blue-collar or manual type jobs will have fewer alternatives on the labour market, and thus will experience more job insecurity during turbulent times (e.g. Gallie et al., 1998). Based on this we proposed that those with lower social status, as defined by work status (i.e. blue-collar workers), would experience more job insecurity than those employees with higher status. This was supported in all samples. Social status predicted job insecurity in all four countries. Also, the chi-square test for equality of magnitudes of regression coefficients indicated that the impact of social status on job insecurity did not differ between countries. We can conclude then that this hypothesis was confirmed. Blue-collar workers appear to be more prone to experiencing job insecurity than other groups of employees. Workers in these types of job have traditionally been more subjected to reorganizations with reductions in personnel (e.g. factory worker layoffs or closedowns), which may increase their perception of risk of job loss. This result may also reflect the powerlessness workers on lower levels experience when faced with threat. These employees may lack the social network or financial resources to seek help or escape from the situation. Since these types of jobs traditionally are associated with a lower level of education, it is possible that these employees lack the skills that assure their employability in other organizations, and thus their alternatives to the present employment are small. This may increase the powerlessness, and the experience of job insecurity among these employees (Turnley and Feldman, 1999).

We tested two hypotheses regarding employment status. The first one postulated that individuals employed on part-time contracts would experience more job insecurity than those working full-time (Levanoni and Sales, 1990). In both the Italian and the Dutch data set part-time work was a significant predictor of job insecurity,

but not in Belgium or Sweden. The magnitudes of effect sizes differed significantly between countries, thus making it difficult to draw any general conclusion regarding the influence of part-time work on the experience of job insecurity. For instance, in Italy, those working part-time experienced higher levels of job insecurity. On the other hand, in the Netherlands, those working full-time reported higher levels of job insecurity, which was contrary to our hypothesis. Despite these contradictory results, this variable still may have some explanatory value for the level of job insecurity. Future research may benefit from taking into account the economic situation of the employee, and whether the part-time (or full-time) status is voluntary.

The second hypothesis regarding employment status suggested that those with contingent contracts would experience more job insecurity than those employed permanently (Sverke et al., 2000). This was supported in all data sets. Those employed under contingent contracts appeared to experience more job insecurity than those in permanent positions. Although the magnitude of effect size differed significantly between countries, contingent work appears to be an important factor for predicting the level of perceived job insecurity. This was expected, given that the objective situation for these workers may be defined as more uncertain than for those with permanent contracts. This result may thus be an example of the interaction between objective situation and the individual interpretation of the situation as posing a threat to the continued employment.

The results of the bivariate analyses are also of interest. Here we tested the association between job insecurity and those variables that were not measured in all four countries, which provides us with at least an indication of their potential impact on the experience of job insecurity. We hypothesized that the less education an employee has, the more job insecurity she or he will experience, partly due to the fact that lower education may limit employment alternatives (see Schaufeli, 1992; van Vuuren et al., 1991). In accordance with this prediction, the correlational results showed a connection between education level and job insecurity in two countries (Belgium and Italy). Although the difference across countries prevents us from concluding that level of education is consistently related to the level of job insecurity experienced, there were signs that education is associated with job insecurity to some degree, and we propose that future research takes this variable into account.

We also hypothesized that employees who had children living at home are more likely to experience job insecurity than employees without child responsibility. We based this on theories suggesting that individuals with a responsibility to take care of others would worry more about keeping their job (Warr, 1987). There was no support for this, since job insecurity was not significantly related to this background variable in any of the data sets. Nor did our hypothesis which stated that the presence of a partner would alleviate the experience of job insecurity receive support. This would have been consistent with previous research defining an employee's partner as an important source of non-work-based support (Lim, 1996). However, we cannot conclude that the presence of a partner is related to job insecurity. Perhaps the negative effects (i.e. economic strain and feelings of responsibility) of supporting children are alleviated by the presence of a partner, as well as by the general economic situation. Research which more narrowly focuses on the specific and combined effects of family and economic factors on the emergence and consequences of job insecurity perceptions would be informative.

In terms of union membership, we tested the hypothesis that those employees who are members of a union would experience job insecurity to a lesser degree than non-members. This was based on theories explaining the possible buffering effect of the support provided by the union (see Dekker and Schaufeli, 1995; Lim, 1996). The relation could only be tested in three data sets, since the Dutch sample consisted only of union members. In none of the other three countries did our hypothesis receive support. On the contrary, results from the Belgian sample indicated that union members actually experienced more job insecurity than non-members. It is conceivable that those who are union members have been alerted to the possibility that they may lose their jobs. This may make them more vigilant, and thus lead them to experience a higher degree of job insecurity than those not looking for signs of imminent job loss. An alternative explanation to the higher levels of job insecurity among union members (in Belgium) is that those who work in areas where their employment is less secure are more likely to join a trade union. Research suggests that unionized workers tend to rate job security as one of the most important issues for the union to work for (Allvin and Sverke, 2000; Bender and Sloane, 1999). This may be a consequence of the uncertainty in the occupations of the unionized workers.

There may be different explanations for why some of our hypotheses were not supported. One explanation can be found in previous research trying to predict job insecurity. Here it has been suggested that particular background variables can lead to increased vulnerability to job insecurity if the individual *believes* a certain characteristic will make her more likely to lose their job (van Vuuren et al., 1991). Instead of assuming that a certain background variable will lead to increased vulnerability to job insecurity, it is possible that we must focus on how an individual perceives her own background characteristics to *affect* her vulnerability. This is reminiscent of the explanation of job insecurity as a subjective phenomenon (Jacobson, 1991). In order to understand the impact of the individual's perception of vulnerability in an uncertain situation, this aspect should be included in future research. This has to some extent been done by van Vuuren et al. (1991), but more research in this vein is necessary. For example, in the present study we used the presence of a partner as an indication of social support, whereas children living at home served as a marker variable for financial responsibility. Information on whether, and why, the employee feels vulnerable due to a certain characteristic would be a useful addition in future data collections.

Another reason for the absence of support for some of the hypotheses may be that the variables defined as predictors rather function as moderators of the reaction to job insecurity. Thus, we should not discard the variables tested in the present study as not having anything to do with job insecurity. As mentioned earlier, a recent meta-analysis (Näswall et al., 2001) has identified gender and social status as moderators of the relation between job insecurity and health outcomes. By building on the results of the present study, it would be useful to test the moderating effect of the various demographic variables on the relation between job insecurity with both health and other outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction, organizational commitment).

Even if we in this study received support for a few predictors of job insecurity (especially social status and contingent work), it is important that we continue searching for predictors of this phenomenon. Perhaps research should focus on other factors that may help explain the occurrence of job insecurity. Social support from family and friends is one factor that has not been extensively highlighted as a predictor of job insecurity (although some research has been done

on non-work-based support; see Lim, 1996). Length of employment in the company may have an influence on the level of job insecurity experienced (Kuhnert and Vance, 1992). There is also the possibility that the availability of alternatives to the present employment may affect how high the levels of experienced job insecurity are. Those who feel they could easily find other employment may not feel insecure. Thus it would be interesting to investigate the predictive power of employability (Turnley and Feldman, 1999). Other variables important to take into account are personality dispositions such as affectivity, locus of control and level of self-esteem (see Roskies et al., 1993; van Vuuren et al., 1991).

The data used in obtaining the results in the present study are mainly collected by random selection of individuals from large samples. The data in the Netherlands, for example, are drawn from members of a large union federation in the Netherlands. This makes it difficult to obtain specific information on the situation for smaller groups of employees. Regretfully, we do not know much about the detailed context of the respondents. However, we do have information from a broad range of individuals in each country, which provides for a more wide-ranging illustration of the relation between job insecurity and background variables. Future research should benefit from focusing on both larger, more varied samples, as well as more contained populations, such as case studies of specific organizations undergoing restructuring, in order to facilitate documentation and control for specific conditions to which the employees are subjected.

The results of the present study make it possible to provide a preliminary answer to our initial question: Who feels insecure in Europe? We have received strong support in all four countries for the conclusion that blue-collar workers and contingent workers are more likely to experience job insecurity. We have also received partial support for the notion that older workers and those with lower levels of education tend to experience more job insecurity. At this point, we need research directed at efforts to reduce the experience of job insecurity, and its negative consequences. This would be beneficial for both employees and organizations, and would contribute to a better working life.

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Katharina Näswall

is a PhD candidate and is working as a research assistant at the Department of Psychology, Stockholm University. Her main interests concern job insecurity and employee well-being.

Hans De Witte

is Professor at the Department of Psychology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium. He teaches work psychology and is a member of the university's Research Group on Stress, Health and Well Being. His research includes the study of the psychological consequences of unemployment, job insecurity, temporary employment and downsizing, as well as attitudes towards work and participation in trade unions. He is involved in different comparative studies concerning these topics in Europe.