Effects of parental job insecurity and parenting behaviors on youth’s self-efficacy and work attitudes

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Abstract

Drawing on the spillover mechanism, the relationships among parental job insecurity, authoritarian parenting behaviors, youth’s self-efficacy, and work attitudes were examined. Specifically, parental job insecurity was hypothesized to be positively associated with (1) authoritarian parenting behaviors, and (2) youth’s perception of parental job insecurity. In turn, we hypothesized that both authoritarian parenting behaviors and youth’s perceptions of parental job insecurity were negatively associated with youth’s self efficacy. Finally, self-efficacy was predicted to be positively associated with youth’s work attitudes. Data were collected from 178 management undergraduates and their parents. Structural equation modeling results suggested that paternal job insecurity was positively associated with authoritarian parenting behaviors while maternal job insecurity was negatively associated with authoritarian parenting behaviors. Additionally, while the relationship between mothers’ authoritarian parenting behaviors and youth’s self-efficacy was supported, the relationship between fathers’ authoritarian parenting behaviors and youth’s self-efficacy was not. Youth’s self efficacy was positively associated with their work attitudes. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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Keywords: Parental job insecurity; Spillover mechanism; Self-efficacy; Work attitudes
1. Introduction

Recent changes in the world and the workplace have generated considerable feelings of job insecurity among employees of today. Typically defined as individuals’ “powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation” (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984, p. 438), job insecurity is a stressful experience for employees and has received considerable attention from various researchers (e.g., Lim, 1996, 1997). More recently, a new stream of research has emerged. Led generally by Barling and his associates (e.g., Barling, Dupre, & Hepburn, 1998; Barling & Mendelson, 1999; Barling, Zacharatos, & Hepburn, 1999; Stewart & Barling, 1996), these studies suggest that the effects of job insecurity go beyond the insecure employee. Indeed, Stewart and Barling (1996) found that children of job insecure individuals experienced social and school-related problems.

While the spillover mechanism, defined as the “effects of work and family on one another that generate similarities between the two domains” (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000, p. 180), has received considerable attention in the literatures on stress and work-family conflict (e.g., Kinnunen, Gerris, & Vermulst, 1996; Wallace, 1997), these studies have not focused on on job insecurity or youth’s self-efficacy per se. This study contributes to the job insecurity literature by using the spillover mechanism as a framework to examine the effects of parents’ job insecurity on youth’s self-efficacy and work attitudes. The relationships among the main variables in our study are depicted in Fig. 1.

Our study is distinct from past studies in that we have chosen to focus on the effects of parental job insecurity’s on youth aged 19–24 in an Asian setting, specifically Singapore. Singapore has not been spared from the recent global economic instability. Understandably, considerable feelings of job insecurity are generated
among individuals, which we expect to affect their children, even when the children are nearing or in their twenties. In Singapore, it is not uncommon for children to continue living with their families (e.g., parents, siblings, and grandparents) well into adulthood—and even after they establish their own families—plausibly due to economic reasons, and the general emphasis that most Asian cultures place on family values. Such living arrangements also render these youth relatively unexposed to the realities of work since they generally do not work at all until they complete their studies. Thus, because of this continued, albeit decreasing, dependence on their parents, we expect that the youth in our study are more influenced by their parents and their parents’ life events, compared to their Western counterparts. In light of the ages of the youth under study, it should be noted that the term “children” as used in this paper will refer to the offspring of the job incumbents in our study, unless otherwise stated.

Our study further differs from Barling and his associates’ previous research efforts in that we posit that it is plausible for job insecurity to directly, rather than indirectly, as suggested by Barling and his colleagues, affect individuals’ authoritarian parenting behaviors. Authoritarian behaviors refer to the demonstration of strict parental control, with minimal parental participation and support for the children (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). Considerable evidence exists in the literature regarding the direct effects of occupational stressors on parenting behaviors (e.g., Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999; Kinnunen et al., 1996). Thus, given that job insecurity is stressful, we expect it to influence parenting behaviors directly.

Additionally, while perceptions of parental job insecurity have been examined in conjunction with children’s work attitudes (e.g., Barling et al., 1998), to date, limited research has examined how perceived parental job insecurity can affect their children’s work attitudes through children’s self-efficacy. Since parenting behaviors and perceived parental job insecurity may affect the further development of youth’s efficacy beliefs, it is worthwhile to examine these relationships.

1.1. Job insecurity and authoritarian parenting behaviors

Individuals experiencing work stress have been found to be more irritable and hostile in their family interactions, leading to more punishing and unresponsive parenting behaviors with their children (e.g., Almeida et al., 1999). Additionally, research suggests that individuals who are emotionally and physically fatigued from their experience of work stress tend to be less sensitive, participative, and supportive where their children are concerned (e.g., Repetti & Wood, 1997). Taken together, these research findings suggest that spillover does indeed occur such that parents who are stressed at work may similarly be stressed at home, and engage in authoritarian parenting behaviors with their children. Thus, this leads us to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. Paternal job insecurity is positively associated with paternal authoritarian parenting behaviors.
Hypothesis 1b. Maternal job insecurity is positively associated with maternal authoritarian parenting behaviors.

1.2. Parental job insecurity and youth’s perceived parental job insecurity

Perceived parental job insecurity refers to the level of parental job insecurity as perceived by the children. Past studies suggest that children are relatively accurate in their observations of their parents’ work experiences (e.g., Barling et al., 1998). This is because children learn about their parents’ work directly—through verbal communication with their parents—and indirectly—through observation of their parents’ moods and behaviors (Galinsky, 1999). Thus, insofar as parents’ work experiences spillover to the family domain, we expect youth to form perceptions about their parents’ work experiences. Indeed, extant studies suggest that children are able to perceive parental job insecurity relatively accurately, through both direct and indirect means (e.g., Barling et al., 1998; Barling & Mendelson, 1999). The preceding discussion thus leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a. Paternal job insecurity is positively associated with paternal job insecurity as perceived by their children.

Hypothesis 2b. Maternal job insecurity is positively associated with maternal job insecurity as perceived by their children.

Insofar as spillover of job insecurity occurs to affect parenting behaviors and perceived parental job insecurity, these could have an effect on children’s development. We focus on the effects of parenting behaviors and perceived parental job insecurity on the further shaping of the self-efficacy levels of youth who are poised to make the transition from school to work.

1.3. Authoritarian parenting behaviors, perceived parental job insecurity and youth’s self-efficacy

Youth are at a particularly vulnerable stage in their lives as they are on the verge of entering adulthood, where new experiences are encountered, and attitudes and beliefs further crystallized. Faced with so many uncertainties, youth may truly need their parents’ support and encouragement. Insofar as non-authoritarian parenting behaviors enhance children’s efficacy beliefs by encouraging them to try out new experiences (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986), authoritarian parenting behaviors, with their emphasis on exercising control and withholding support, may inhibit youth’s willingness to try out new experiences. Thus, their sense of enactive mastery may be inhibited and their efficacy beliefs, eroded. Hence, we put forth the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a. Paternal authoritarian parenting behaviors are negatively associated with youth’s self-efficacy.
Hypothesis 3b. Maternal authoritarian parenting behaviors are negatively associated with youth’s self-efficacy.

Youth who witness their parents losing their jobs, or experiencing disruptions in their employment status despite their parents’ best efforts, may be more inclined to believe that little could be done to avert the situation. This, in turn, may detract from youth a sense of mastery over their environment and erode their self-efficacy. Indeed, existing research suggests that parental job insecurity affects children’s cognitive difficulties and detracts from the children what is required for optimal performance (Barling et al., 1999). In line with the above arguments, therefore, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 4a. Perceived paternal job insecurity is negatively associated with youth’s self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 4b. Perceived maternal job insecurity is negatively associated with youth’s self-efficacy.

1.4. Youth’s self-efficacy and their work attitudes

To the extent that efficacious youth perceive that they are able to achieve good performance at work and consequently yield valued outcomes, this may generate in them a greater interest in the work performed. This serves to motivate them further, thus reinforcing their work motivation and work involvement. Thus, we posit that:

Hypothesis 5. Youth’s self-efficacy is positively associated with their work attitudes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Data were collected by questionnaire surveys from undergraduates attending management courses at a large state university in Singapore, and from their parents. This enabled us to avoid exclusive reliance on children’s self-report data.

A pre-test was first conducted with 10 undergraduates to elicit feedback for improving the questionnaire. Classes were randomly selected from the cohort of students. Questionnaires were then administered to a total of 400 undergraduates. At least one of the researchers would provide a 10 min briefing to each class of participants, summarizing the objectives and instructions for the survey. Each respondent was then given a student survey and two sealed envelopes, which were addressed to the student’s father and mother, respectively. Each sealed envelope contained one parental questionnaire and a self-addressed return envelope. In the cover letter of the parental questionnaire, respondents were asked to complete the survey without consulting either their spouse or their children, and to place the completed survey
in the return envelope and seal it. Completed sets of questionnaires were then collected by the researchers two weeks later during class. Respondents were given a booklet of postage stamps as an incentive for participation.

A total of 263 surveys were returned. Fifteen surveys were excluded as many questions were left uncompleted. Since the data could only be utilized if both parents completed the questionnaires, another 70 surveys had to be excluded, leaving 178 full data sets. Thus, a final response rate of 45% was yielded in this study. While relatively low as responses could only be used if both parents returned the surveys, this response rate is comparable to those reported in other studies using similar samples (e.g., Barling et al., 1998).

About 67% of student respondents were women. The mean age of respondents was 21 years ($SD = 1.7$, range $= 19–24$) for students; 52 years ($SD = 3.8$) for fathers; and 49 years ($SD = 3.6$) for mothers. About 94% of fathers and 85% of mothers held full-time jobs, while the remaining were employed in temporary or part-time positions.

2.2. Instrumentation

Items measuring the variables in this study were derived from an extensive review of the literature on job insecurity and family functioning. Scales that operationalized variables were adopted from past research where psychometric properties have been established.

**Parental job insecurity.** Kuhnert and Vance’s (1992) 18-item scale measuring both job permanence (i.e., the extent to which respondents believe that they could keep their present jobs indefinitely), and employment security (i.e., the extent to which respondents perceive that they could get jobs comparable jobs elsewhere in the event of loss of present jobs) was used to assess this variable. Sample items include “I am not really sure how long my present job will last” and “If I wanted to, I could easily find a comparable job elsewhere.” Five-point Likert scales were used, ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree.

**Perceived parental job insecurity.** This variable was tapped using Barling et al.’s (1998) revised version of Kuhnert and Vance’s (1992) scale. Items were reworded to represent children’s perceived parental job insecurity. Sample items include “My father (mother) is not really sure how long his (her) present job will last” and “If my father (mother) wanted to, he (she) could easily find a comparable job elsewhere.” Items were scored on 5-point Likert scales anchored from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree.

**Authoritarian parenting behaviors.** Authoritarian parenting behaviors as perceived by the children were measured using Gecas and Schwalbe’s (1986) 15-item scale, comprising 3 dimensions, namely (1) parental control (i.e., degree to which parents attempted to limit their children’s autonomy); (2) non-participation (i.e., degree to which parents spent little time and participated in few activities with their children); and (3) non-support (i.e., degree to which parents showed little affection and helped their children). Sample items include “My father (mother) has always told me how I should behave,” “My father (mother) spent little time with me,” and “My father
(mother) seemed to approve of me and the things I did.” Five-point Likert scales were used, with those for the parental control and non-participation dimensions anchored from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree; and those for the parental non-support dimension anchored from (1) Very Often to (5) Never. High scores suggested authoritarian parenting behaviors that were more controlling, less participative and less supportive.

Self-efficacy. Sherer et al.’s (1982) 17-item self-efficacy Scale (SES) was used to assess the self-efficacy variable. Sample items include “When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work” and “I avoid trying to learn new things when they look too difficult for me.” Items were scored from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree.

Work attitudes. Work involvement was assessed with Kanungo’s (1982) six-item scale. Stern, Stone, Hopkins, and McMillion (1990) eight-item scale was used to measure work motivation. Examples of items in the work involvement dimension include “Work should be considered central to life,” while items in the work motivation dimension include “A person should feel a sense of pride in his/her work.” All items were scored on a five-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree.

2.3. Analytical procedures

We performed structural equation modeling (SEM) using EQS. Following Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) recommendations, we first assessed our measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Following that, we estimated our hypothesized model and compared it to two other alternative nested models, namely (1) a less constrained model, with paths added from perceived parental job insecurity to youth’s work attitudes to test whether perceptions of parental job insecurity exerted direct and indirect effects on youth’s work attitudes; and (2) a more constrained model, in which paths from authoritarian parenting behaviors to youth’s self-efficacy were removed to test their significance to the model.

In our analyses, the Maximum Likelihood method of parameter estimation was used. For latent variables measured with single indicators, we took measurement error into account based on Niehoff and Moorman’s (1993) recommendations. Several sets of correlations among error terms were also estimated. Specifically, we allowed the measurement error terms to correlate across the parallel measured variables for the parental and perceived parental job insecurity latent variables and for the paternal and maternal authoritarian parenting behaviors. This is because it makes intuitive sense to expect that parallel measured variables may share similar sources of measurement error (Markel & Frone, 1998).

Overall fit of the model to the data was assessed using multiple fit indices, namely: (1) the chi-square ($\chi^2$) statistic; (2) the normed fit index (NFI); and (3) the comparative fit index (CFI). The latter two indices are fairly robust and independent of sample size, and should be greater than .90 to indicate an acceptable model fit. We assessed the series of nested models using the sequential chi-square difference test (SCDT), which refers to the chi-square difference between two nested models (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).
3. Results

A summary of the means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients, and correlations of the study variables is presented in Table 1. Reliability coefficients of the subscales in this study ranged between .65 and .88.

We analyzed the data based on the total sample (N = 178), which met the minimum satisfactory sample size of 100–150 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Results suggest that the measurement model ($\chi^2[75, 178] = 211.58, p < .05$; NFI = .90; CFI = .91) provides a good fit to the data since both NFI and CFI met the acceptable benchmark of .90 and above. Next, we tested the fit of our hypothesized model to the data. Again, although a significant chi-square value was obtained ($\chi^2[86, 178] = 222.54, p < .05$), both NFI (.90) and CFI (.91) suggest that our hypothesized model fit the data well. Next, we performed the nested models comparison. We compared the hypothesized model to the less constrained ($\chi^2[84, 178] = 222.32, p < .05$; $\chi_d^2 = .22, df = 2$, not sig.) and more constrained ($\chi^2[88, 178] = 276.23, p < .05$; $\chi_d^2 = 53.69, df = 2, p < .05$) alternatives, which suggest that our hypothesized model explained the data better. The final structural equation model with its standardized parameter estimates is presented in Fig. 2.

Results in Fig. 2 suggest that paternal job insecurity was significantly and positively associated with paternal authoritarian parenting behaviors ($\beta = .20, p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1a was supported. However, maternal job insecurity was significantly but negatively associated with maternal authoritarian parenting behaviors ($\beta = -.21, p < .05$). Thus, support was not provided for Hypothesis 1b.

Both Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported. Specifically, paternal and maternal job insecurity were significantly and positively associated with children’s perceptions of paternal and maternal job insecurity ($\beta = .99$ and .60, respectively, $p < .05$).

Contrary to our initial prediction, results suggest that the relationship between paternal authoritarian parenting behaviors and youth’s self-efficacy was not statistically significant. Hence, Hypothesis 3a was not supported. However, maternal authoritarian parenting behaviors was negatively and significantly associated with youth’s self-efficacy ($\beta = -.26, p < .05$), thus providing support for Hypothesis 3b. Support was also obtained for both Hypotheses 4a, that perceived paternal job insecurity was negatively associated with youth’s self-efficacy ($\beta = -.32, p < .05$); and 4b, that perceived maternal job insecurity was negatively associated with youth’s self-efficacy ($\beta = -.30, p < .05$). Finally, youth’s self-efficacy was found to be significantly and positively associated with their work attitudes ($\beta = .97, p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

4. Discussion

Through the use of a sample of Singaporean parents and their children, our study helps to ascertain the generalizability of Western findings on the effects of job insecurity on employees’ family in an Asian setting. Our results not only corroborate Barling et al.’s (1998, 1999) findings that parental job insecurity is accurately
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<td>16. Work motivation</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>(.65)</td>
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<td>17. Work involvement</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>(.83)</td>
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* N = 178 and missing values have been excluded. The numbers in parentheses on the diagonal are coefficient alphas.

* * * * p < .001.
perceived by their children, but also go further than existing research in suggesting that experienced parental job insecurity directly and significantly associates with authoritarian parenting behaviors. Interestingly, while fathers reported, that for them, spillover of job insecurity into the home domain resulted in more authoritarian parenting behaviors, the reverse was not true for mothers. A plausible explanation for these findings may be derived from the framework developed by Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate (2000), which suggested that the extent to which individuals identify with a particular role in their lives is likely to influence the integration of this role with other roles, and the difficulty for everyday role transitions to occur.

Traditional gender role socialization—particularly in Asian societies like Singapore—provides a plausible explanation regarding the differential identification with the work role (Lim, Teo, & Loo, 2001). Since men are generally socialized to be the breadwinners in families, the work role may be perceived to be a salient part of fathers’ lives such that it is difficult for them to make the daily role transition from employee to parent. Thus, the work role and its incumbent stressors (i.e., job insecurity) are integrated with their role as fathers, making spillover into the family domain more likely. Such spillover may result in fathers demonstrating more authoritarian parenting behaviors. Conversely, women, being socialized to assume a more significant role as wives and mothers, may have a stronger identification with this role. Thus, regardless of their experienced levels of job insecurity, little, if any, of their negative emotions spillover from work to affect their children at home.

Mothers may also be more skillful in managing their emotions, as suggested by extant research. For example, Almeida et al. (1999) found that mothers, but not fathers, were able to lessen the spillover of experienced marital tension into their interactions with their children. This is because women have been normatively allocated the role of nurturer and caregiver, which inherently “counters the spillover
of tension from one relationship to another” (Almeida et al., 1999, p. 58). Along this line of reasoning, it is possible that mothers, being attuned to maintaining boundaries between familial subsystems, are better able to manage their work stress such that spillover into the family domain is minimized.

While mothers’ authoritarian parenting behaviors were found to significantly affect children’s self-efficacy, this was not the case for fathers. Again, a plausible explanation may be derived from gender role socialization. Since women have traditionally been socialized to assume the primary responsibility for child-rearing, they are generally perceived to be nurturing and protective relative to fathers, who tend to play the role of the disciplinarian. In particular, mothers may interact more, and share more intimate and emotional relationships with their offspring (Galinsky, 1999). Thus, mothers' parenting behaviors could be more consequential for their offspring’s development and maturation, with their authoritarian parenting behaviors having more adverse effects on children’s self-efficacy beliefs.

Results of our study also add on to extant research in that spillover effects of job insecurity were found to negatively influence youth’s self-efficacy through perceived parental job insecurity. To the best of our knowledge, these relationships have not been extensively examined in previous studies. It is plausible that when youth observe their parents’ job insecurity, they form perceptions about their parents’ apparent vulnerability over their lives. They may also form perceptions regarding their parents’ inability to manage their stress and negative emotions so as to minimize spillover. Consequently, youth may perceive that they are equally vulnerable and could potentially fail in managing their emotions and their lives. Through such vicarious modeling, youth may feel less certain about their own capacity for success in future endeavors, which thus leads to a reduction in their self-efficacy levels.

Finally, youth who believed themselves to be highly efficacious were also more likely to hold more positive work attitudes. While the link between self-efficacy and work attitudes has not been extensively examined, several authors have suggested that higher self-efficacy levels could positively influence children’s work motivation and work involvement (e.g., Bandura, 1995). Hence, this study provides evidence to substantiate the potential role that self-efficacy plays in predicting youth’s work attitudes. Prior to entering the workforce, youth’s self-efficacy beliefs influence their expectations of future success or failure (Galinsky, 1999). Efficacious children feel more assured of success in putting forth the required levels of performance to succeed in various life domains, including work. Hence, they tend to develop more positive attitudes towards work.

Several limitations are inherent in our study. First, while a cross-sectional design was deemed suitable for our present study as it represents preliminary research in the area of job insecurity in Asia, this precludes drawing definite causal inferences about the relationships among the variables. Thus, our results remain, at best, suggestive. The shortcomings of our cross-sectional study may be addressed in future research through the use of longitudinal design.

Second, our data relied mainly on self-reports. While steps were taken to obtain independent responses from parents and their children to mitigate the effects of common method bias to some extent, future research should further rule out inflation of
parameter estimates by collecting data using methods (e.g., in-depth interviews) other than surveys.

Third, this study represents a preliminary non-Western investigation on the effects of parental job insecurity on youth. Our results suggest that cultural influences could negate the spillover effects of job insecurity on authoritarian parenting behaviors. Developing a stronger body of related publications in non-Western settings could shed light on other cultural differences in the familial effects of job insecurity.

The present research builds on and extends existing literature on job insecurity by investigating the spillover effects of parental job insecurity on the development of youth’s self-efficacy and work attitudes. Results of our study suggest that there is indeed a need for scholars and practitioners alike to recognize the numerous implications that employees’ job insecurity holds for the individuals, their families, and organizations. As the workplace becomes characterized by greater volatility and uncertainties in the new millenium, the issue of job insecurity shall remain a concern for not only employees and organizations, but also for the families of insecure employees.

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References


