

Moderator Effects of Gender in the Job Insecurity—Career Engagement Relationship: A Nigerian Study

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Abstract

The study explores the moderating effects of gender on the job insecurity – career engagement relationship. The survey involved 223 Nigerian bank employees who gave their personal consent to take part in the research. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis revealed that a significant negative relationship exists between perceived job insecurity and career engagement ($b = -.67, p < .001$). The moderator effects of gender on the negative relationship between perceived job insecurity and career engagement was significant ($b = .20, p < .001$). The negative relationship was found to be stronger for men than for women at any particular level of job insecurity. In contrast to expectation, women reported significantly higher levels of career engagement than their male colleagues. The study finding underscores the need for intervention and provides a framework for further studies.

Keywords: career, gender, proactive, merger, job loss, engagement, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Career engagement is a range of proactive career behaviour that is aimed at enhancing career advancement (Hirschi et al., in press). Unlike the traditional career context where employees took a passive role in managing their careers (Vos & Soens, 2008), the modern career man and woman is increasingly responsible for the successful management of his or her own professional development (Okurame, 2008). Thus, employees have a stronger motivation to build capacity that enables them fulfill personal aspirations in their careers rather than wait for their organizations to give them opportunities to advance (Briscoe et al., 2011). Employees are increasingly engaged in self-directed career management and spend a substantial part of their life-time pursuing career goals (Okurame, 2012). This proactive career orientation has been associated with essential individual and organizational outcomes (Cao et al., 2013) such as the attainment of objective as well as perceived success in a career (Enache et al., 2011), commitment to the organisation (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009; Fernandez & Enache, 2008), employability (McArdle et al., 2007), enhanced self-efficacy and performance, and career satisfaction (Cao et al., 2013; King, 2004). These findings indicate that career engagement is beneficial in the modern work context.

Arguably, one of the major threats to reaping the benefits of career engagement in the modern work context is job insecurity. Job insecurity reflects employees' perception that their job is threatened to the extent that they cannot prevent actual job loss (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984). Consequently, it is viewed as a subjective anticipation of job loss whereas the individual still wants to remain on the job (Sverke et al., 2002). Although, the potential threat of job insecurity to proactive career behaviour is theoretically robust, no empirical investigation has been carried out. Likewise, no research has investigated the speculation that the potential threat of job insecurity to career engagement may differ for men and women. These uncertainties offer the potential for an empirical investigation of job insecurity in the Nigerian banking sector, which has triggers of job insecurity and where career engagement is of increasing importance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Linking Job Insecurity to Career Engagement

Job insecurity, one of the most investigated job stressors in the literature (Chirumbolo & Areni, 2005), is described as a short-fall in the degree of security an employee feels on the job (Hartley et al., 1991). By and

large, the phenomenon of job insecurity is subjective because it develops from an employee's perception of his or her employment circumstances. Indeed, data with respect to job insecurity levels of employees within the same organisation varies due to differences in the perception of the objective and common work situation (De Witte & Näswall, 2003; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Mauno et al., 2005; Rosenblatt & Ruvio, 1996; Sverke et al., 2002; Virtanen et al., 2002).

The situation in organisations in recent years has increasingly predisposed employees to the experience of job insecurity; making job insecurity a nearly universal organisational phenomenon (Lee et al., 2006). This trend is particularly visible in the Nigerian banking sector where there is persistent pressure occasioned by tough economic conditions, the need to meet official rules for banking practice, and to contend favourably with competitors (Okurame, 2012). To foster effectiveness and ensure corporate survival, many Nigerian banks have restructured, merged, downsized or retrenched workers. The literature suggests that this trend increases uncertainty which leads to a heightened anticipation of job loss among individuals who survive mergers, acquisitions and downsizing (Hartley et al., 1991; Näswall et al., 2006).

Continuing reform in the Nigerian banking sector has made job insecurity a key issue facing bank employees, and the heightened sensitivity of survivors to subsequent potential job loss is considered an obnoxious phenomenon with far reaching negative consequences on their career orientation. Indeed, empirical findings have linked perceived threat of job loss to low performance, reduced job satisfaction and involvement, and organisational commitment (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Gilboa et al., 2008; Sverke et al., 2002; Sverke et al., 2010). In addition, empirical findings have showed that job insecurity leads to elevated levels of psychological distress and turnover intentions (De Witte et al., 2010; Reisel et al., 2010), counterproductive work behaviour, inhibited job search activities, and reduced openness to organisational change (Lim, 1997; Probst, 2002). Although, the foregoing studies are not investigations of the direct link of job insecurity to career engagement, implicit in their findings is the fact that job insecurity may negatively influence employees' engagement in their career activities. This conclusion seems reasonable because, by and large, the literature suggests that job insecurity diminishes motivation and commitment. Consequently, there are strong theoretical assumptions underlying the suggestion that perception of job insecurity negatively affects an employee's engagement in his or her career.

One approach that serves as a basis for understanding the psychological process through which job insecurity negatively affects career engagement is the theory of Conservation of Resources (COR). Major researchers in the examination of this theory are Gorgievski and Hobfoll (2008) and Richter (2011). The theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that human resources are generally categorised into four groups, namely: objects (such as, house, car, clothing, food, computer equipment, etc.), individual features (such as, self-esteem, perceived commitment), condition (such as, job tenure, friendship, marriage, and seniority) and energies (such as, income, savings, knowledge and time that can aid gaining new resources). These resources, which often exist in a combination, are created and conserved through innate as well as learned drive (Hobfoll, 1989; Hochwarter et al., 2007).

According to COR theory, when any of our resources are threatened, the phenomenon of anticipatory stress becomes the order of the day (Hobfoll, 1989). The theory suggests that previous downsizing, mergers, acquisitions and layoffs which have resulted in the withdrawal of resources from other employees raises a survivor's sensitivity to subsequent potential job loss. Often, this makes 'survivors' job-insecure employees who are unsure about the continuation of their employment and career prospects. In line with the COR approach, this experience is expected to shape career engagement through a key principle known as the primacy of resource loss. This principle suggests that resource loss is more important than resource gain and typically goes along with negative emotions (Pettit et al., 2010). Employees who feel threatened by job loss would necessarily anticipate a loss of valuable conditions such as, career, friendship, and financial security (De Witte, 1999). Since job-resource is a major predictor of engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), when a loss of resources seems imminent, individuals are more inclined to focus on their losses and weaknesses rather than search for new or existing career opportunities. Employment provides individuals with not only income but also opportunities for personal and career development activities. Thus, the feeling of job insecurity may diminish the importance of career activities, more so when getting a new job is difficult. This implies that career engagement would be negatively affected by an employee's concern about actual or anticipated loss of significant resources. Accordingly, it is expected that perception of job insecurity would be negatively related to career engagement in this study.

2.2 Direct and Moderator Effects of Gender on Career Engagement

Contemporary accounts of gender role norms favour men, thereby creating differences in the career experiences of men and women (Bakari & Leach, 2007; Wood & Newton, 2006). However, regarding proactive career

behaviour, the scanty empirical evidence does not conclusively support gender differences. While the possibility of gender differences has been proposed by some researchers (Lykes, 1985; Prince-Gibson & Schwartz, 1998), others argue that the potential for gender differences in favour of men is neutralized by the permissive nature of self career management (Valcour & Ladge, 2008). Proponents of gender differences argue that women have significant domestic roles to combine with work, especially in organisations that lack family-friendly policies, and these are thought to inhibit women's potential to engage in proactive career behaviour. On the contrary, researchers who are in favour of gender balance argue that proactive career behaviour permits career exploration in ways that accommodate family responsibilities, and as such, allow women the opportunity to self-direct their careers on their own terms (Lirio et al., 2007; Valcour & Ladge, 2008). This inconsistency creates a need for further studies to clarify the direct influence of gender on career engagement.

Although, gender studies within the context of job insecurity are inconclusive and sometimes contradictory, they underscore the potential that gender may moderate the negative role of job insecurity in career engagement. Empirical investigations have showed that because traditional role values requires men to support their family with earned income, their level of job insecurity tends to be higher than that of women (Mauno et al., 2005; Richter, 2011; Sverke et al, 2006; Ugboro & Obeng, 2001). In line with gender role theory, therefore, men tend to be more affected by threats to the work domain which is a valuable source for projecting and maintaining the male identity (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Gaunt & Benjamin, 2007). On the other hand, anticipated job loss is less of a threat to women's wellbeing because they possess alternative identities (Wajcman & Martin, 2002). It is reasonable, therefore, to expect that the experience of job insecurity and its negative effects will be stronger for men. In contrast to this conclusion, some studies have found that women reported higher levels of job insecurity than men (Kinnunen et al., 2000; Näswall & De Witte, 2003). It is argued that such findings are possible because it is much more difficult for women to get new jobs compared to men (McMullin & Berger, 2006; Smith, 2009; Weller, 2007). Other researchers (e.g., Burke et al., 2008; Erlinghagen, 2007) have provided empirical evidence that men and women express comparable levels of job insecurity. The foregoing suggests an inconsistent pattern of the influence of gender on job insecurity and how this may decrease or increase career engagement activities of men and women, hence the need to ascertain the moderator role of gender in the Nigerian banking population.

2.3 Research Justification and Study Hypotheses

Previous studies on job insecurity have focused on many of its individual and organisational effects, including psychological wellbeing, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Although, theoretical arguments about the potential negative relationship between job insecurity and career engagement are reflected in the literature, an empirical test of this assumption has not been carried out. This neglect is surprising given that career engagement is crucial to many favourable individual and organisational outcomes. Employees place an utmost premium on their vocations, and spend valuable time and energy proactively managing their careers (Okurame, 2012). For these reasons, an empirical investigation of factors that may hinder career engagement should be of concern.

Again, an investigation of how job insecurity may affect career engagement is useful within the context of modern organisations where job insecurity is a constant underlying threat. A study that provides a context-specific database on the nature of the job insecurity–career engagement relationship should be important in the Nigerian banking sector where triggers of job insecurity such as restructuring, mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing are an increasing phenomenon and it is in the best interest of employees and their organisations to manage its negative impact on career engagement. To date, there has not been a systematic examination of how job insecurity occasioned by changes in the Nigerian banking sector impacts on career engagement, especially when career engagement is strongly linked to high performance—a major concern of banking organisations in Nigeria. Therefore, the current investigation will provide empirical information that will guide banking organisations in their quest for quality vocational engagement among employees.

Researchers (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Kinnunen et al., 2010; Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003; Näswall et al., 2005; Richter, 2011; Sverke et al., 2002) have called for studies that clarify factors which mitigate or worsen the detrimental effects of job insecurity. One of such moderator variables is gender. So far, the examination of job insecurity within the context of gender has generated conflicting results. While men and women were comparable in some studies, differences were obtained in others. This creates a need for further studies in this area. Importantly, too, the participation of men and women in the Nigerian banking sector is shifting sharply towards a good balance of gender. Many women have joined the ranks of the sector's workforce to augment their family's financial status and assure economic security. The need to examine how this change affects the experience of job insecurity and career engagement is, therefore, apparent and necessary.

Therefore, the study's main aims are: to examine the relationship between job insecurity and career engagement—Hypothesis 1: The greater the level of job insecurity expressed by an employee, the lower their level of career engagement; to investigate the direct influence of gender on career engagement – Hypothesis 2: Men will report stronger career engagement than women; and to investigate the extent to which gender moderates the relationship between job insecurity and career engagement – Hypothesis 3: Gender will moderate the negative relationship between job insecurity and career engagement, such that the negative relationship will be stronger among men than among women.

The findings will enhance knowledge about the nature of the relationship of job insecurity and gender with career engagement, and will inform the design of interventions in the sector. The investigation will also afford an opportunity to ascertain if the association of job insecurity with negative outcomes is a universal phenomenon or context specific. .

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Data for the study were collected from 223 (129 males and 94 females) bank employees in Nigeria. The average age of respondents was 31.01 years ($SD = 4.61$) with a mean organisational tenure of 3.39 years ($SD = 0.93$). Respondents were either junior (48%, $n = 107$) or intermediate (52%, $n = 116$) staff. The majority of the participants were married (69.1%, $n = 154$). Their educational status varied thus: 101 (45.3%) had higher diplomas and professional qualifications, 76 (34.1%) held first degrees and professional qualifications, and 46 (20.6%) had postgraduate degrees and professional qualifications.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Control Variables

With the exception of gender, all demographic data obtained from the participants were potential covariates in this study. These were collected as single items and include; age and organisational tenure, job status (1 = junior and 2 = intermediate), marital status (1 = single and 2 = married) and highest educational attainment (1 = higher national diploma and professional qualification; 2 = first degree and professional qualification and 3 = postgraduate degree and professional qualifications).

3.2.2 Job Insecurity

This was assessed using a 10-item scale developed by Ashford et al. (1989) to measure perceived threat of job loss. It measures the likelihood of total job loss and is appropriate for use in diverse cultural contexts (Kinnunen et al., 2000; Rosenblatt & Ruvio, 1996). The authors reported significant construct validity for the scale. The validity of the scale was ascertained using item and factor analyses. These yielded an item-total correlation of at least .58 and a .67 least item factor loading. In the present study, the scale recorded a .83 Cronbach's alpha. Participants were requested to respond to scale items on a Likert format that ranged from 1 "very unlikely", to 5 "very likely". Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of perceived job insecurity.

3.2.3 Gender

Male respondents were coded 0 while females were coded 1.

3.2.4 Career Management

The study utilised a 9-item scale developed by Hirschi (2011) to assess, in general terms, an employee's level of involvement in proactive career management activities. The Hirschi scale reported a one-factor structure and Cronbach's alphas of between .85 and .94 across 13 measurement occasions with the standardisation sample. The scale has significant construct validity in relation to specific career behavior and attitudes (Hirschi, 2011; Hirschi & Freund, under review). In this study, item analysis and factor structure provided validation evidence for the scale. While .61 was obtained as the lowest item-total correlation, all scale items loaded significantly in a single-factor structure. In the present study, the scale recorded a .88 Cronbach's alpha. Participants responded to items on the Likert scale that ranged from 1 "almost never", to 5 "very often". Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of career engagement.

3.3 Procedure

Data for the study were collected from employees in the sampled organizations during working hours using a questionnaire. Participants were approached and informed about the study and were told that participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could opt out of the study if they so desired. Potential respondents were informed that the research was an academic activity which assured anonymity and the confidentiality of

responses supplied to questionnaire items. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to employees who indicated interest in the study. They were told to respond to the items truthfully at their leisure and to return the completed questionnaire to the researcher. Respondents returned a total of 247 questionnaires at the close of survey. However, 24 questionnaires with incomplete data were eliminated. As a result, 223 questionnaires constituted the data for analysis.

4. Results

With the exception of gender which is a moderator variable in this study, all demographic data obtained from respondents were regarded as potential covariates. However, demographic variables that were selected as covariates were those with significant correlations with the main variables of study and that have modest relationships with each other (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). To determine control variables and to assess the extent of multicollinearity in the study, a preliminary analysis, which involved intercorrelation of all variables, was carried out. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and inter-correlation of study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD
1. Age	-	.23***	-.02	.15*	.38***	.25***	.13	-.13*	31.0	4.61
2. Gender		-	.06	-.02	.32***	.03	.34***	-.05	-	-
3. Job status			-	.08	.04	-.01	.06	.17**	-	-
4. Org. tenure				-	.29***	.09	-.27***	-.12	3.4	0.93
5. Marital status					-	.06	.33***	-.16**	-	-
6. Education						-	.15*	.02	-	-
7. Job insecurity							-	-.42***	38.1	2.58
8. Career engagement								-	28.5	3.28

Note. * = $p < .05$. ** = $p < .01$. *** = $p < .001$.

The results reveal that age ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$), job status ($r = -.17$, $p < .01$) and marital status ($r = -.16$, $p < .01$) were significantly related to the dependent variable while organisational tenure ($r = -.27$, $p < .001$), marital status ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) and educational attainment ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) were significantly related to the independent variable. Consequently, age, job status, organisational tenure, marital status and educational attainment were selected as covariates for analyses. Generally, the correlation results revealed that the study was not affected by multicollinearity.

The hierarchical regression analysis was used in this study to assess the influence of job insecurity on career engagement and the moderator role of gender in the job insecurity–career engagement relationship. This tool is considered appropriate because it enables an understanding of the absolute contributions of the predictor variables to career engagement. The hierarchical regression analysis involved four steps. In the first step, covariates were entered into the equation. This was followed by the independent (job insecurity) and moderator (gender) variables in the second and third steps respectively, and the interaction term obtained by multiplying the moderator variable by the independent variable (using the centering procedure) in the fourth step. Table 2 presents the results of this analysis.

Table 2. Results of hierarchical regression analyses predicting career engagement

Predictors	β	R^2	ΔR^2	F	T
Step 1: Age	-.09				-1.100
Job Status	-.17*				-2.499*
Organisational Tenure	-.08				-1.137
Marital Status	-.08				-0.926
Educational Attainment	.06	.064*	.064*	2.946*	0.802
Step 2: Job Insecurity	-.67***	.324***	.261***	17.286***	-9.132***
Step 3: Gender	.14*	.340*	.016*	15.820***	2.252*
Step 4: Gender X Job Insecurity	.20***	.377***	.037***	16.177***	3.559***

Note. * = $p < .05$. *** = $p < .001$.

Table 2 reveals that job status is the only control variable with a significant relationship with career engagement

($b = -.17, p < .05$); although all the covariates, acting together, were significant predictors of career engagement ($R^2 = .064, p < .05$). Hypothesis 1 stated that the greater the level of job insecurity experienced by an employee, the lower their level of career engagement. Results of hierarchical regression analysis showed that this hypothesis was strongly supported. Table 2 shows that the negative relationship between job insecurity and career engagement is significant ($b = -.67, p < .001$) and accounted for an absolute 26.1% ($p < .001$) change in career engagement in the second step.

Results of the analysis in the third step did not support hypothesis 2 which predicted that men will report stronger career engagement than women. The results in Table 2 revealed that gender was significantly and positively related with career engagement ($b = .14, p < .05$), indicating that women reported significantly higher levels of career engagement compared to men. Thus, although gender was significantly related to career engagement, it was not in the expected direction. Hence, hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that gender would moderate the negative relationship between job insecurity and career engagement, such that the negative relationship would be stronger among men than among women. The interaction of gender and job insecurity was significant in the fourth step ($b = .20, p < .001$) and accounted for a 3.7 percent ($p < .001$) change in career engagement. To interpret the nature of the interaction effect, unstandardized regression coefficients which are appropriate for interpreting such effects (Aiken & West, 1991) were utilized. An examination of the interaction effect revealed a negative relationship between job insecurity and career engagement for men and women, but it was stronger for the former, such that, the rate of decrease in career engagement with increasing job insecurity level is higher among men than among women at any particular level of job insecurity. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported.

5. Discussion

Job insecurity has generated considerable interest and empirical research but there is a dearth of studies investigating its relationship with career engagement and the influence of gender on this relationship. Consequently, this study examined the direction of the relationship between job insecurity and career engagement, and explored the moderating effects of gender on the relationship. The study was carried out in the Nigerian banking sector where constant mergers and acquisitions have increased the potential for perceived job insecurity. By and large, study findings represent a positive contribution to the extant career literature as it established that job insecurity and career engagement have a negative relationship, thereby providing empirical support to buttress theoretical arguments that job insecurity negatively affects career engagement; and ascertained that gender is an important moderator of the negative relationship between job insecurity and career engagement.

The finding that job insecurity and career engagement are negatively related indicates that higher levels of job insecurity results in less proactive career behaviour. The current findings suggest that the negative outcomes produced by job insecurity may not be context-bound. Consequently, it can be argued that the relationship between job insecurity and career engagement is negative because a typical employee in the Nigerian banking sector who fears job loss pays less attention to proactive career behaviour. This conclusion is relevant because job insecurity generates stress and tension which can prevent individuals from investing time and energy in their career development. Alternatively, a reverse potential explanation can be adduced for the finding. It is possible that bank employees who are less inclined to career engagement activities show a greater tendency towards perceived job insecurity. This is plausible because correlation data does not rule out the possibility of inversely associated variables running in the opposite direction.

The result that female employees reported significantly higher levels of career engagement compared to their male counterparts is not in line with the study hypothesis. It also contradicts a large number of findings in the literature that men tend to exhibit more proactive career behaviour compared to women. The finding implies that being female increases the likelihood of proactive career activities in the Nigerian banking sector, and vice versa. This finding suggests that the effects of gender may differ across profession and population. If this argument holds, then the setting in which this study was conducted can be advanced as an explanation for the present findings. The participation of men and women in the Nigerian banking sector is approaching a gender balance. Women have showed a growing interest in the sector as justified by their rising numbers and quest for a successful career in the sector. However, being a female employee may come with additional challenges because of traditional gender role values. This may serve as a catalyst for increased proactive career activities among women and could be adduced as a possible reason for the unexpected pattern of gender behaviour. Alternatively, and in line with previous arguments (Okurame, 2007), this finding may reflect the success of gender mainstreaming career interventions in the Nigerian context.

A major contribution of this study is the finding that gender is a significant moderator of the job insecurity–career engagement relationship. The interaction term obtained by multiplying gender and job insecurity affected the strength of the negative impact of job insecurity on career engagement in the hypothesized direction. The rate of decrease in career engagement with increasing job insecurity is greater for men than women. This pattern of interaction effects signifies that when men experience higher levels of job insecurity, its negative effects on proactive career behaviour is significantly stronger. As earlier noted, men tend to depend more on employment resources because traditional role values require them to be the breadwinner of the family (Sverke et al., 2006; Richter, 2011), making them more affected by stressors from the work domain (Gaunt & Benjamin, 2007). Therefore, the current findings may reflect the fact that job insecurity is substantially more stressful for male employees, such that it inhibits their career engagement disposition. Since the effects of control variables were held constant for both sexes in the study, it seems valid to conclude from the present findings that the negative impact of job insecurity is stronger for men.

Generally, the findings of this study are of particular practical importance for organizations in the Nigerian banking sector, and similar organisations that seek to foster career engagement despite increasing potential for perceived job insecurity among employees. First, results show that greater levels of job insecurity are associated with lower levels of career engagement. Second, the results show that being a male predisposes an employee more to this negative association. One practical application of these findings is for management to adopt interventions aimed at addressing employee concerns about actual or anticipated job loss (since these are the triggering factors of job insecurity) to make them more proactive in their career behaviour. While programmes for reducing the experience of job insecurity would benefit both sexes because the job insecurity–career engagement relationship was negative for men and women, there is a need to pay particular attention to male employees as they are prone to a stronger negative impact.

The interpretation of these findings, however, requires some caution because of study limitations. First, the present study is exploratory. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalising the findings of this study to banking organisations in different national cultural contexts. This creates a need for future research among bank employees in other contexts. Second, data obtained from self-report measures are limited to the extent that they tend to involve under or over reporting by respondents. Therefore, caution should be exercised in the interpretation of the findings despite the use of psychometrically sound measures for data collection. Future studies should explore the possibility of utilising concrete measures of job loss threat and career engagement. The foregoing limitations, notwithstanding, the findings of the present study make a positive theoretical and practical contribution to models of career behaviour.

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