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# Work-Related Well-Being: From Qualitative Job Insecurity to Cognitive Reappraisal

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## Abstract

This study contributes to the understanding of the moderating effect of cognitive reappraisal, as a personal resource, for the relationship between qualitative job insecurity (QJI) and work engagement. Data was collected from 190 employees (53% men) who work in a multinational company in Romania. Hypotheses were tested using a hierarchical regression analysis, with work engagement as the dependent variable. The results support the moderation hypothesis: a cognitive reappraisal, as an efficient type of emotion regulation strategy, moderates the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement. Practical implications of the present findings suggest that trainings aimed at improving emotion regulation skills can help to increase work engagement for employees that experience job insecurity based on deteriorating work conditions, specific to the qualitative job insecurity.

**Keywords:** work engagement, qualitative job insecurity, cognitive reappraisal, work-related well-being

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## 1. Introduction

Many organizations are undertaking sustained efforts to enhance their own employee's well-being, in general, and employee's engagement, in special. In this chapter, we will focus on work engagement, as a particular form of work-related well-being, and its relationship with proper antecedents and moderators. Work engagement is a positive state of well-being in relation to work, characterized by identification with one's work, and a high level of energy [1]. Moreover, vigour and dedication comprise the core dimensions of work engagement [2, 3]. Based on the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R model; [4]), well-being, in general, and work engagement, in particular, have job resources and demands as antecedents. Also, this model suggests that personal resources are predictors of work engagement and can buffer the unfavourable effects of job demands.

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Job insecurity, as an economic reality, has been present in any and every market economy. In Europe, the unemployment rate has reached critically unprecedented levels [5]. In Romania, the challenges of the labour market are related to the high rate of young unemployed people. Also, the migration of highly skilled workers and an ageing population add to the challenge of developing a competitive economy for Romania. Thus, job insecurity is also a workplace stressor in organizational life, being less investigated in relation to work engagement. Against this background, the aims of the present study are to place job insecurity research in a Romanian context and investigate the buffering role of emotional regulation strategies in the job insecurity – well-being relationship; this way, we aim to contribute to the search for potential moderators.

Job insecurity “implies feelings of helplessness to preserve the desired job continuity” ([6], p. 2). Recently, in the literature, a distinction was made between two types of job insecurity (JI): quantitative and qualitative job insecurity (QJI). Thus, if quantitative job insecurity “implies feelings of helplessness to preserve the desired job continuity” ([6], p. 2), qualitative job insecurity is defined as “perceived threats of impaired quality in the employment relationship, such as deterioration of working conditions, lack of career opportunities, and decreasing salary development” ([7], p. 182). Qualitative job insecurity might develop as a result of organizational changes [8]. Because qualitative job insecurity implies a feeling of insecurity about the continuity of appreciated job aspects in the future, it can be considered an emotional demand [9]. Also, while quantitative job insecurity was extensively studied, especially regarding performance [10], research on qualitative job insecurity is less advanced. Further research is needed on the topic. This study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement from the standpoint of its moderators, especially in the case of Romanian workforce. De Witte [6] argued that the detection of moderators in the relation between job insecurity and outcomes has a double aim. From a theoretical point of view, this detection adds knowledge about the direction in which job insecurity influences well-being. From a practical perspective, it is significant “because it provides indications about the variables that have to be influenced or changed, when one aims to reduce the negative consequences of job insecurity” ([6], p. 5). Recently, Wang et al. [11] advocated more research on personal characteristics as moderators of job insecurity. They argued that this kind of research is crucial for the theoretical development of the job insecurity literature and provides practical implications for organizations on how to train employees to manage job insecurity crisis.

Till now, there is only limited evidence for the interaction between job demands and personal, social or cultural resources [12]. Tremblay and Messervey [13] tested the hypothesis that compassion satisfaction buffers the impact of job demands on anxiety and depression, on a military chaplain sample. The results of regression analyses showed that personal resources (like compassion satisfaction) buffered the impact of role overload, as job demand, on job strain. In this case, personal resources act as a protective factor in relation to adverse working conditions. Furthermore, in their study among Romanian migrating workers, Vîrgă and Iliescu [14] tested the moderating effect of acculturation and support for family. Specifically, they hypothesized that acculturation could buffer the negative impact of job insecurity on well-being measures (like work engagement, burnout and health) and that support for family will boost this negative relation. They asked 477 Romanian employees who work in Spain to fill in

questionnaires. Results of hierarchical linear modelling showed that acculturation buffers against the negative effects of job insecurity on well-being (engagement, burnout and mental health), but support for family had no intervening effect in this relation.

Personal resources are defined as positive self-evaluations that refer to individuals' ability to control their environment successfully [12, 15]. Personal resources (like self-efficacy, optimism, or personal ability to regulate emotions) have a great contribution to moderate the relation between job demands and well-being. Thus, personal resources can help to combat stressful situations and facilitate goal fulfilment in the face of hindrance job demands [16]. For instance, job insecurity could deplete a person's inner resources [17]. Based on the transactional model of stress and coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman [18], employees with a high level of personal resources can better cope with the job demands [19]. Nevertheless, in the literature, only a limited number of studies have examined personal resources as moderators of the effects of job insecurity on well-being (e.g. [20]). Personal resources are individual characteristics which can be modified and developed by training. This can play a significant role in increasing individual resilience in unpredictable situations that can obstruct the relations at work, like qualitative job insecurity.

Emotion regulation is defined as "the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" ([21], p. 275). In this study, we focused on cognitive reappraisal, as an efficient type of emotion regulation strategy. Cognitive reappraisal occurs very early in the emotion-generative process and prevents the development of negative emotions [22]. We have selected cognitive reappraisal, as a strategy for emotion regulation and personal resource, based on previous research proving this strategy is associated with positive organizational aspects [23]. Also, cognitive reappraisal may be considered a personal resource because it is malleable and continues to be improved even unto old age [24].

Specifically, we will test the cognitive reappraisal as a moderating construct in the association between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement. This study is one of the few which analyzes the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal, as a strategy of emotion regulation and personal resource too, in the relation between the job demands and organizational well-being.

Based on the transactional model of stress and coping [18], we argue that a high level of cognitive reappraisal can act as a buffer against the undesirable impact of qualitative job insecurity on work engagement. Accordingly, our study aims to reappraise cognitive reappraisal and consider it as a personal resource, which can be developed to better cope with qualitative job insecurity. Specifically, the objective of the present study is twofold. First, we will examine the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement. Second, we will investigate the moderating effect of cognitive reappraisal in the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement.

## **2. Qualitative job insecurity and work engagement**

Work engagement is a fulfilment in relation to work and has a core component, vigour and dedication, which fosters positive individual outcomes like performance and health [1]. Vigour is characterized by a high energy level, mental strength during labour and willingness to

invest effort in work and to persist even in the face of obstacles [25]. Dedication is characterized by enthusiasm, inspiration, honour and challenge [2].

The Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R model; [4]) is one of the most used models to explain work engagement. This model can be used in any work environment and can be adapted for any job assessment, given that the principle of the model is that any job is composed of two categories of elements: job demands and job resources [12]. Job resources (like feedback, autonomy, transformational leadership or social support from colleagues) are specific for each organization and have an important role in predicting engagement. However, engagement is weakly, negatively related to job demands, such as workload, time pressure or cognitive demands [12].

Job insecurity, as hindrance job demand, has been negatively related to employees' well-being, in general, and to work engagement, in particular [26, 27]. Moreover, employees who experience job insecurity show less engagement at work [27–29].

In this chapter, we analyze a special type of job insecurity, qualitative job insecurity, which is the insecurity related to the job content, the working conditions or the degree of social support in the job one may experience in the future [8]. Recent research indicates that qualitative job insecurity is an important job stressor and may have the same negative consequences as quantitative job insecurity [30]. Research on this topic is developing, but more inquiry is needed to identify the impact of qualitative job insecurity on work-related well-being, in general, and on work engagement, in particular.

The first aim of the present study is to investigate the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement. Thus, we formulate the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Qualitative job insecurity is negatively associated with work engagement.*

### 3. Cognitive reappraisal as moderator

The JD-R model supports the idea that the effects of job demands are moderated through personal means [4, 31]. According to Ref. [32], individual differences in emotion regulation affect the way work-related emotional events relate to individual well-being and performance. For example, emotionally competent people who actively address emotional job stressors do have less adverse health effects later [33, 34]. This study also adopts the transactional model of stress and coping [18] to analyze the relations between stressors, well-being and coping strategies in Romanian employees. Experiencing job uncertainty related to work conditions has a great potential for an increase in job-related stress and an impact on employees' feelings and behaviours [18].

Emotion regulation is a key mechanism for our survival and is at the core of successful social interactions [35]. It is defined as “a controlled process that is used to change a person's spontaneous emotional response” ([36], p. 2). According to Ref. [21], emotion regulation consists of the efforts people make during emotionally distressing events to influence the experience (its intensity, duration, etc.), and the expression of the activated emotions [22] designed a process-oriented model of emotion regulation to classify the strategies people use to regulate their emotions.



Emotion regulation strategies are ways in which people can modulate their emotions [37]. Depending on when these cognitive events occur along the timeline of information processing, there is cognitive reappraisal (also known as antecedent-focused regulation), which comes early in the emotion-generative process, and response-focused regulation (e.g. expressive suppression), which is applied when emotions are already fully experienced and only modifies the emotional display, not the experience [32].

A dysfunctional cognitive emotion regulation, in general, contributes to a decreased quality of life and well-being [37]. According to Ref. [21], the use of antecedent and response-focused strategies is considered to differ in their consequences on health and well-being. Thus, expressive suppression turns out to be an ineffective strategy in terms of altering emotional experiences because it decreases the emotional expression, but not the intensity of the felt emotion [22, 37] at the price of cognitive load which may provoke one's impaired memory and affect their social functioning [32]. Thus, individuals who resort to the use of expressive suppression also experience increased depression and anxiety, are less satisfied with their lives and relationships and are more pessimistic about the future [35, 37].

Also, reappraisal imposes a much smaller cognitive load because it does not need to monitor one's feelings and behaviour later on [22, 38], cognitive performance is not negatively influenced, memory is not decreased [38], and interpersonal communication is not impaired. Instead, health, memory and social relationships are all positively influenced by cognitive reappraisal [23, 38, 39]; people report a better interpersonal functioning [35] and positive well-being [37]. Experiencing job uncertainty is a great potential for stress in employees, and this affects their feelings and behaviours [14]. Specifically, when employees feel that the continuity of important job features is threatened, their engagement tends to decrease. However, a cognitive reappraisal, as an efficient strategy for emotion regulation, prevents the development of negative emotions [22]. We chose this strategy for the present research because the cognitive reappraisal behaves as a buffer in the relation between qualitative job insecurity and engagement. This way, it diminishes the negative effect of job insecurity (i.e. fear of losing privileges related to the job), on employees' engagement.

The second aim of this study is to investigate the moderating effect of cognitive reappraisal on the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement, which has not, to our knowledge, been so far investigated. Thus, we formulate the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2: Cognitive reappraisal buffers the negative relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement.*

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants and procedure

Data were collected from employees who work at a multinational company in Timisoara, Romania, regarded as one of the largest multinational companies in Romania. The employees voluntarily participated in the study and were asked to fill in paper and pencil self-report questionnaires. Anonymity was guaranteed. We distributed 300 questionnaires. Finally, 190

respondents (53% men) returned the questionnaire (63.6% response rate). The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 61 years ( $M = 29.86$ ,  $SD = 8.56$ ).

4.2. Measures

We used Romanian versions of all instruments which were evaluated using the standard back-translation technique.

*Qualitative job insecurity* was measured with a four-item scale, tapping into similar aspects as the items of [40]. A sample item reads “I feel insecure about the characteristics and conditions of my job in the future”. Respondents were asked to evaluate the items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“totally disagree”) to 5 (“totally agree”). On our sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for qualitative job insecurity scale is  $\alpha = 0.82$ .

For measuring *cognitive reappraisal*, we used the five-item revised version of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ, [35, 37]). A sample item reads “When I’m faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm”. Answers are collected using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1—totally disagree to 7—totally agree. On our sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for cognitive reappraisal scale is  $\alpha = 0.70$ .

*Work engagement* was measured with two dimensions of the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; [41]): Vigour (three items: “At my workplace, I burst with energy”.) and Dedication (three items: “I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose”). All items were scored on a seven-point frequency scale, ranging from 0 (“never”) to 6 (“always”). Following the previous research [42, 43], we used these two dimensions as core work engagement. On our sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for core work engagement is 0.87.

4.3. Analysis

Hypotheses were tested using hierarchical regression analysis, with work engagement as the dependent variable.

5. Results

**Table 1** presents the means, standard deviations, correlations and reliability estimates for the variables in the model. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of reliability are ranging from 0.70 to 0.87. As predicted, a negative correlation was found between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement ( $r = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Also, a positive correlation of cognitive reappraisal was found with engagement ( $r = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

In order to test hypothesizes H1 and H2, we conducted hierarchical multiple regressions with cognitive reappraisal as a moderator. First, we transformed the predictor (job insecurity) and the moderator (cognitive reappraisal) in Z scores, and we entered the predictor variable in Step 1 and the moderator in Step 2; we then entered their interaction term in Step 3.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Qualitative job insecurity	7.31	2.46	(0.82)	0.03	−0.33**
2. Cognitive reappraisal	23.34	5.98	–	(0.70)	0.15*
3. Work engagement	23.15	7.31	–	–	(0.87)

Notes: *N* = 190; \* *p* < 0.05; \*\* *p* < 0.01; two-tailed. Cronbach's alphas are listed on the diagonal.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

**Table 2** presents the results of the hierarchical regression analyses. We tested the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and cognitive reappraisal and the interaction between qualitative job insecurity and cognitive reappraisal, with work engagement as the dependent variable.

In Step 1, the effect of qualitative job insecurity was tested. Results show that qualitative job insecurity explained 11% of the variance in work engagement ( $\beta = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $F(1, 188) = 24.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). More specifically, high levels of qualitative job insecurity were related to lower levels of work engagement. Thus, H1 was supported.

After controlling for the qualitative job insecurity, the effect of cognitive reappraisal on work engagement was tested in Step 2 of the regression analysis. The addition of the moderator variable also revealed a significant effect for engagement. Results show that cognitive reappraisal only explained 2% of the variance in work engagement ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $F(1, 187) = 5.87$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, cognitive reappraisal predicts engagement, after controlling for qualitative job insecurity. More specifically, high levels of cognitive reappraisal were related to higher levels of engagement, after controlling for qualitative job insecurity. In Step 3 of the regression analysis, we entered the interaction between qualitative job insecurity and cognitive reappraisal. Thus, the

Predictors	Work engagement		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Qualitative job insecurity (QJI)	−0.33**	−0.34**	−0.34**
Cognitive reappraisal (CR)		0.16*	0.19*
QJI × CR			0.15*
$R^2$	0.11	0.14	0.16
Change in $R^2$		0.02	0.02
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$	24.21**	5.87*	5.18*

Notes: *N* = 190; \*\* *p* < 0.01; \* *p* < 0.05.

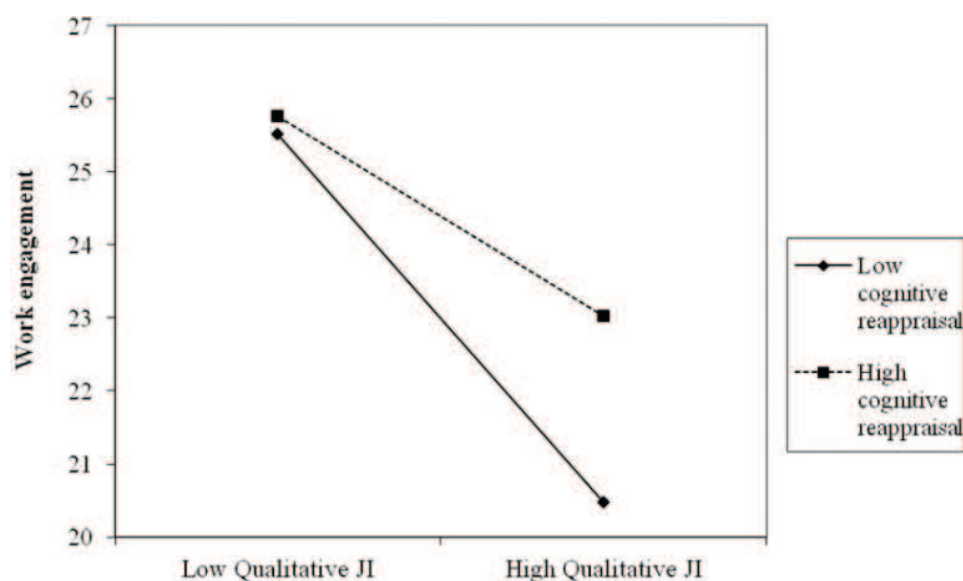
**Table 2.** Moderated hierarchical regression analyses for work engagement.



results show that the two-way interaction explains a statistically significant part of the variance in work engagement ( $F(1, 186) = 5.18, p < 0.05, \Delta R^2 = 0.02, p < 0.05$ ). The qualitative job insecurity has statistically significant interactions with cognitive reappraisal ( $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.05$ ).

Simple slope analyses were conducted for this statistically significant interaction. As shown in **Figure 1**, when confronted with high qualitative job insecurity, employees with a high level of cognitive reappraisal reached a high level of work engagement ( $\beta = -1.37, t [189] = 12.50, p < 0.001$ ). Also, when low qualitative job insecurity is associated with a high level of cognitive reappraisal, employees are highly engaged ( $\beta = -2.52, t [189] = 56.34, p < 0.001$ ).

To conclude, H2 is supported for qualitative job insecurity, in interaction with cognitive reappraisal (as a personal resource): cognitive reappraisal is a moderator and buffers the negative relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement.



**Figure 1.** Interaction effect of qualitative job insecurity and cognitive reappraisal in predicting work engagement.

## 6. Discussions

This study examined the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal, as a personal resource, in the relationship between qualitative job insecurity, as a stressor, and work engagement, as job-related well-being indicator, for a sample of Romanian workers. Based on JD-R model [4] and the transactional model of stress and coping [14], this study proposed that cognitive reappraisal buffers the effect of job insecurity on work engagement. The results support our hypotheses and offer evidence about the relation between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement on a Romanian sample.

In addition to the initial studies that brought evidence for the detrimental associations of qualitative job insecurity with employee well-being [40], in our study qualitative job insecurity was directly associated with work engagement, as work-related well-being [20, 40]. One possible explanation for this finding is that employees who experience a fear that their working

conditions can be devaluated, or experience a high level of qualitative job insecurity, could also experience a low level of engagement for work.

The results also support the moderation hypothesis: cognitive reappraisal moderates the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and work engagement. However, the employees who use cognitive reappraisal, as a strategy of emotion regulation and, implicitly, as a personal resource, can develop a higher work engagement when they perceive a high risk of deterioration in working conditions, as compared to those who have a lower cognitive reappraisal use. Employees who use cognitive reappraisal as an emotional coping strategy would develop a positive affective attitude towards the organization in which they work, even if they perceive threats of impaired quality in the employment relationship.

## 7. Limits and future research

The present study has a few limitations. One limitation would be its correlation nature. This type of research design does not permit clear conclusions on causality that occurs between the studied variables. The data was also obtained by self-report, which can lead to errors due to the effects of common variance. However, it is argued that the biasing effects of self-reports are overstated and, when measuring variables like cognitive reappraisal, the subjective experience is what matters. The sample used was one of convenience, consisting of employees from the same organization. Future research could be conducted on employees in other occupational categories and different age groups.

Also, in future research, we could refine the measurement of well-being forms and study the effects of interaction between qualitative job insecurity and cognitive reappraisal for each type of well-being. Besides the interaction effects between qualitative job insecurity and cognitive reappraisal, it would be interesting to check the interaction of three variables, such as between job demands, personal resources and job resources. For future research, a longitudinal study would be necessary on this theme, in order to observe the dynamic of the relationship between these variables across time.

## 8. Practical implications

Based on the results of our study, employees could be trained to manage their emotions and reduce the job strain accordingly. Intervention programmes that increase the adaptability of the employees to the organizational environment should be implemented to develop the individual mechanism of emotion regulation. The employees who use cognitive reappraisal, as a personal resource, have a better organizational adaptation and a high level of work engagement.

Recent research provided evidence about the positive impact of an emotion regulation training (like Affect Regulation Training (ART); [44]) on improving emotion regulation skills and the well-being of employees in health [45]. Based on the integrative model of *Adaptive Coping with Emotions* (ACE), Berking [44] created and developed the standardized Affect Regulation

Training (ART), which focuses on the improvement of those emotion regulation abilities as strategy to increase well-being. The ART includes stress relaxation and cognitive-behavioural techniques and adds mindfulness-based strategies to improve emotion regulation [45]. One such intervention programme, which emphasizes emotion regulation skills, could strengthen personal resources of employees who are confronted with uncertainty conditions of work and increase their work-related well-being.

Thus, in the context of job uncertainty, for boosting work engagement, as work-related well-being, it's necessary to create interventions based on training for personal resources, especially emotional regulation skills. However, the strong relation between work engagement and performance adds one more argument for the project and implements effective interventions for the increase of employees' engagement.

## 9. Conclusion

Personal resources can help employees deal with different job demands in relation with well-being. Specifically, cognitive reappraisal, as an effective emotion regulation strategy, can be conceptualized as an important personal resource in the context of qualitative job insecurity. Especially, employees that experience feelings of uncertainty about future work conditions, or a decrease in their salary, should have a repertoire of efficient emotional strategies helping them deal with negative emotional demands. Cognitive reappraisal, as a way of cognitive change, acts as an emotional coping ability in insecure contexts and supports employees in successfully dealing with negative perspectives in work situations.

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