

Parents' Job Insecurity Affects Children's Grade Performance Through the Indirect Effects of Beliefs in an Unjust World and Negative Mood

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The authors postulated a model in which children's perceptions of their parents' job insecurity indirectly affect their grade performance through the effects of beliefs in an unjust world and negative mood. A total of 127 undergraduate students (55 male, 72 female) completed questionnaires on their perceptions of their parents' job insecurity and their own beliefs in an unjust world and negative mood. The parents reported on their own job insecurity. In addition, students provided their course grades from the previous semester 3 months after completing the questionnaires. Support for the proposed model was provided using LISREL 8.

Consistent with recent major economic trends, which have brought about a move away from stable, full-time employment toward unstable, part-time employment and feelings of job insecurity (*The Downsizing of America*, 1996), much research has focused on the nature and effects of job insecurity (e.g., Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989). We now know that experiencing job insecurity exerts negative effects on employees' own well-being (e.g., anger, cynicism, and reduced satisfaction) as well as on work-related functioning (e.g., lower job morale, motivation and performance, and increased distrust in management; Ashford et al., 1989; Brockner, 1988, O'Neill & Lenn, 1995).

More recently, there have been suggestions that when one family member experiences job insecurity, others in the family might be affected. Support for this notion derives from several sources. First, research shows a consistent link between parents' work experiences and children's attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Barling, 1990; Piotrkowski & Stark, 1987). Second, at a very early age, children are accurate observers of their parents' work experiences (Abramovitch & Johnson, 1992; Kelloway & Watts, 1994). When children see their parents as being alienated

from work or dissatisfied with their job, there are negative effects on the children's own well-being (Abramovitch & Johnson, 1992; Piotrkowski & Stark, 1987) and their work-related attitudes and beliefs (Barling, Kelloway, & Bremermann, 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994). Third, on the basis of interviews, it would appear as though one family member's job insecurity has an unsettling influence on other family members' well-being (e.g., *The Downsizing of America*, 1996). Fourth, children whose parents experience job-related insecurity display social and school-related problems (Flanagan & Eccles, 1993; Stewart & Barling, 1996b), including poor grades and rejection of authority (Silbereisen, Walper, & Albrecht, 1990).

More specifically for the purposes of the present study, Barling, Dupre, and Hepburn (1998) investigated the effects of parents' job insecurity on children's work beliefs and work attitudes. In their study, mothers' and fathers' separate reports of their own job insecurity, as well as the number of layoffs they had experienced, predicted children's perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' job insecurity. Perceiving one's father (but not one's mother) as insecure in his job was negatively associated with children's work beliefs (Protestant work ethic and the humanistic work belief). In turn, work beliefs was a strong predictor of children's work attitudes (motivation to do good work and alienation from work). In addition, the relationship between perceived paternal job insecurity and children's work beliefs was moderated by identification with the father, such that this relationship was stronger under conditions of high identification with the father.

We deviate from that research in the present study in several fundamental ways. First, we addressed the

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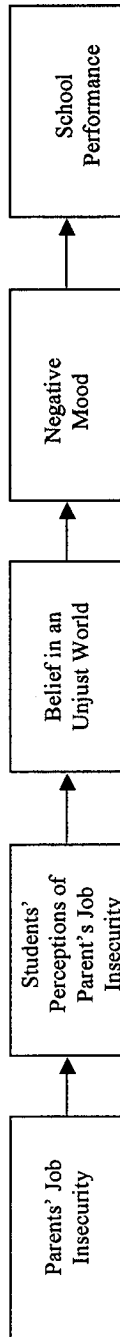


Figure 1. Proposed model linking parents' job insecurity and children's grades through the indirect effects of belief in an unjust world and negative affect.

effects of parents' job insecurity on a different outcome, namely, children's school performance as measured by their grades. Focusing on performance at school is vital. Grades as a measure of school performance is important for several reasons. In the short term, school performance has profound effects on the student, inasmuch as their grades affect self-esteem and how peers, teachers, and families perceive them. For example, Krahn (1991) noted that unemployment is higher among high school dropouts, which suggests that any relationship between children's perceptions that their parents are insecure at work and school performance is of considerable social importance (Barling, Zacharatos, & Hepburn, 1999). In the long term, grades obtained will influence the educational and occupational opportunities open to students. In fact, school performance in as early as the 9th grade has been found to predict career success 35 years later (e.g., Super, 1985), and course scores received in the 12th grade are even better predictors of career success. The present sample represents students who have recently finished the 12th grade, which suggests that reduced grades as an indirect result of their parents' job insecurity may have lasting effects on their career paths.

Our study also differs from that of Barling et al. (1998) in the nature of mediating variables studied. Barling et al. showed that children's own work beliefs mediate the effects of perceived parents' job insecurity on their own work-related attitudes. In the present study, we propose that two separate variables sequentially and indirectly link the effects of parental job insecurity on children's grades. First, we suggest that when children see their parents working hard and offering loyalty to their organizations, yet still experience job insecurity, the transaction will be viewed as unjust. As a result, children's perceptions that their parents' are experiencing job insecurity will predict that they will harbor beliefs in an unjust world (see Figure 1).

The second variable studied was negative mood. In previous research, negative mood has consistently mediated the effects of work stressors on well-being, whether the stressors are experienced on a daily (e.g., Barling & MacIntyre, 1993; MacEwen, Barling, & Kelloway, 1992; Repetti, 1993) or a chronic basis (Barling & MacEwen, 1992; MacEwen & Barling, 1991; Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986). Similarly, negative mood mediates the effects of nonwork stressors on well-being (Barling, MacEwen, & Nolte, 1993; Barling, MacEwen, Kelloway & Higginbottom, 1994; Higginbottom, Barling, & Kelloway, 1993).

Consistent with these latter findings, we suggest that perceiving the world as unjust would leave people feeling sad, anxious, and angry. There is some evidence that believing the world is an unjust place is positively associated with depressive symptoms (e.g., Ritter, Benson, & Snyder, 1990), life dissatisfaction (e.g., Dalbert, 1998), and the perception that life stressors are a threat rather than a challenge (e.g., Tomoka & Blasovitch, 1994).

We also argue that negative mood would predict poor school performance because previous research (e.g., Motowidlo et al., 1986; Stewart & Barling, 1996a) has demonstrated a link between negative affect and job performance as well as school performance (e.g., Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1995). More specifically from the perspective of this study, we anticipate that negative mood arising from the belief that the world is unjust would result in poor performance at school. Consequently, negative mood will indirectly relate the effects of children's belief in an unjust world on grade performance.

Our study also differs from Barling et al.'s (1998) investigation of parental job insecurity in the way in which both parents' job insecurity is conceptualized. Barling et al.'s model postulated that mothers' and fathers' job insecurity exerted separate effects and required that data from both parents be used. One unintended consequence of this is a potential bias in the resulting sample toward intact nuclear families, and as the nuclear family becomes less normative (Barling & Sorensen, 1997), there is a potential decrease in the generalizability of the findings. To overcome this potential limitation, we started with a different assumption concerning the effects of parents' job insecurity on their children. We assumed that when only one parent was employed, or only one parent was present, that parent would transmit all the effects of perceived job insecurity onto the child. Thus, for our study, if one parent in a two-parent household was employed and the other was not, the working parent would model the effects of job insecurity. In addition, if a child was only exposed to one parent, that single parent's experience of job insecurity would reflect the full meaning of job insecurity to the child. Aside from the major advantage of not biasing the sample, this procedure also enhances ecological validity. Furthermore, including the effects of only one parent in a portion of the sample should provide attenuated effects and lead to more conservative estimates in our model.

Thus, we hypothesize that when children see one or both parents experiencing job insecurity, they will view the world as unjust. In turn, this will lead to

children experiencing negative mood, which leads to lower grades. To investigate this issue, we used two different data sources: (a) parents' self-report of job insecurity and (b) children's self-reports of their parents' perceived job insecurity, their own beliefs in an unjust world, their own negative mood, and their grades. In addition, we used a short-term longitudinal design in which parents' job insecurity and children's perceptions are measured 3 months before grades were obtained.

Method

Participants

Approximately 230 undergraduate commerce students from three classes at a Canadian university were approached to participate in the present study. A total of 154 students voluntarily participated (67% response rate) in the study in exchange for a lottery ticket. To participate, at least one of their parents had to be employed at least on a part-time basis, and self-employed parents were excluded because job insecurity may be less relevant in that context. Twenty-seven students who completed the study were excluded from the analyses because neither their mother nor their father completed a questionnaire. Of the 127 students who had at least one parent respond to the survey, 38 (20 male, 18 female) only had a father who worked, 35 only had a mother who worked (13 male, 22 female), and 54 (22 male, 32 female) had both their mothers and fathers working. This resulted in a final sample of 127 (55 male, 72 female) children (M age = 19.24 years, SD = 0.83, range = 18–22 years).¹ Over 97% of the participants were 21 years old or younger, increasing the extent to which they were still influenced by their parents.

Measures

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of all study variables appear in Table 1.

Parents' self-reported job insecurity was measured with Kuhnert and Vance's (1992) 18-item job insecurity measure (e.g., "I am not really sure how long my present job will last"); as in Barling et al. (1998), we generated a unidimensional scale from these items. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), and the scale was internally consistent (α = .85). High scores reflect job insecurity.

Students' perceptions of each parent's job insecurity was measured with Barling et al.'s (1998) revised version of Kuhnert and Vance's (1992) 18-item Job Insecurity Questionnaire. Items were reworded for the present study to represent

¹ The use of the term *children* to identify a sample of late adolescents may seem somewhat misleading. However, we specifically chose this word to reflect the shared relationship that students have with their mothers and fathers in the present study. It also reflects the impact of parents' work experiences on their sons and daughters, regardless of their age or whether they live on campus or with one or both parents.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistencies, and Intercorrelations for Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Parent's JI ^a	2.55	0.62	(.85)						
2. Perceptions of parent's JI ^a	2.40	0.57	.54***	(.85)					
3. Belief in an unjust world ^a	3.17	0.34	.16	.13 ^c	(.62)				
4. Sadness ^b	1.15	0.53	.12	.24**	.33***	(.72)			
5. Anger ^b	1.17	0.62	-.01	.22*	.27***	.48**	(.75)		
6. Anxiety ^b	1.47	0.56	-.03	.10	.20*	.48**	.63***	(.73)	
7. Average grades	77.07 ^d	5.68	.07	-.02	-.11	-.11	-.09	-.33***	(.71)

Note. Cronbach's alphas appear on the diagonal in parentheses. JI = job insecurity.

^a Measured on a 5-point scale. ^b Measured on a 4-point scale. ^c Significant one-tailed. ^d To standardize the average grades so that they are on a similar scale as the other measures, we divided the grades by a constant of 20 before entering them into a covariance matrix.

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

students' perceptions of one or both parents' job insecurity (e.g., "My mother is not really sure how long her present job will last"). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), which was internally consistent ($\alpha = .85$).

Belief in an unjust world (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) comprised 20 items, which we adapted slightly for a Canadian sample (e.g., "It is a common occurrence for a guilty person to get off free in Canadian [vs. American] courts"), measuring the degree to which the world is perceived as an unfair and unjust place (e.g., "It is rare for an innocent man to be wrongly sent to jail," reversed-coded). Items were rated on a 5-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), and the scale yielded acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .62$).

Negative mood was measured with a 15-item adjective checklist adapted from Nowlis (1965). Items were classified into three subscales (Anger, 4 items; Anxiety, 6 items; Sadness, 5 items), and respondents were asked to indicate the frequency in which they had experienced each mood in the last 3 months along a 4-point response scale (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = fairly often, 3 = very often). Each subscale demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Anger = .75, Anxiety = .72, and Sadness = .71).

Grades received in courses from the previous semester were reported by students 3 months later. A mean grade was obtained by averaging course grades for each student. This measure demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .71$).²

Procedure

We asked students in three separate classrooms ($n = \pm 80$ students in each) to complete a package of questionnaires. Participants who consented were given a questionnaire to fill out in class and an open envelope in which they were to return their completed questionnaire to the researchers. In addition, participants were given two sealed envelopes, one each for their mother and father, and were asked to address the envelopes for both parents (even if their parents shared the same address) and to return the parental questionnaires unopened to the researchers. This was to ensure that as much as possible, parents' responses were independent of those provided by their children. To encourage parents' responses, we also asked students to include a short note to each of their parents, requesting that they take part in the present study. Inside each of the parental envelopes was a questionnaire package, a letter explaining the purpose of the study, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. The questionnaires were identical for both parents.

Of the 91 employed fathers who responded (M age = 51.04 years, $SD = 4.89$, range = 40–61 years), 30% had com-

² There was variability in the number of courses and grades reported by each student participant (range two to six courses). Therefore, we calculated an alpha score only for participants who reported grades for five courses ($n = 70$). There were more people reporting four course grades ($n = 83$). However, the small number of items (i.e., course grades) resulted in a low reliability ($\alpha = .59$). The mean grade was computed by averaging the scores for all the courses reported by each student ($M = 77.07$, $SD = 5.68$), which was virtually identical to the average grades reported by those who reported exactly five course grades ($M = 76.89$, $SD = 5.93$).

pleted a 4-year university degree. Of the 89 employed mothers who responded (M age = 48.2 years, SD = 4.28, range = 37–61 years), 16% had completed a 4-year university degree. A full 11% of fathers reported having been laid off at least once within the last 5 years, and 26% had been laid off at least once within the last 20 years. Mothers fared slightly worse, as 13% reported having been laid off within the last 5 years and 29% had been laid off at least once in the last 20 years.

Results

Mothers reported higher levels of job insecurity than fathers (M mother = 2.91, M father = 2.24, M both = 2.52), $F(2, 124) = 12.9, p < .001$. Consistent with this finding, students perceived their mothers to be suffering from greater levels of job insecurity than their fathers (M mothers = 2.51, M fathers = 2.23), $t(91) = 3.42, p < .01$. There were not, however, significant relationships between mothers' and fathers' reports of job insecurity, $r(54) = .21, ns$, nor between children's perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' job insecurity, $r(77) = .15, ns$. In addition, part-time working mothers (M part-time = 2.93, M full-time = 2.59), $t(89) = 2.30, p < .05$, but not part-time working fathers (M part-time = 2.53, M full-time = 2.38), $t(91) = 0.44, ns$, reported greater levels of job insecurity than their full-time counterparts. We also conducted tests for gender differences between children on all of the self-report measures to assess if mothers' and fathers' work-related experiences differentially influenced sons and daughters. No gender differences were found. Therefore, we combined the data of both full- and part-time working parents and students' perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' job insecurity.

We used structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation as implemented by LISREL 8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993) to test the proposed model; the covariance matrix of all observed measures was used. Sadness, anger, and anxiety were used as indicators of the latent variable, negative mood. The remaining variables in the model were treated as single indicators of latent variables to account for measurement error. We fixed the unique variances of these single indicators as the product of $[1 - \text{reliability of the measure}]$ and the variance.

We initially tested the measurement model specifying no latent relationships. As specified, the measurement model provided an acceptable but not outstanding fit to the data: $\chi^2(8, N = 127) = 23.08, p < .005$; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .95; adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = .84; root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .11; normed fit index (NFI) = .88; confirmatory fit index (CFI) = .91;

parsimonious normed fit index (PNFI) = .34; parsimonious goodness-of-fit index (PGFI) = .27, and all estimated parameters were significant.

The proposed indirect model offered a reasonable fit to the data: $\chi^2(14, N = 127) = 25.81, p < .05$; GFI = .95; AGFI = .90; RMSEA = .07; NFI = .87; CFI = .93; PNFI = .58; PGFI = .47, and represented a significantly better fit than the null model: $\chi^2(21, N = 127) = 196.51, p < .001$; χ^2 difference (7) = 170.70, $p < .001$. These findings support our hypothesis that the relationship between parental job insecurity and grades is an indirect one. More specifically, the results suggest that children accurately perceive that one or both parents are experiencing job insecurity. This leads to a cognitive appraisal that the world is an unjust place. These beliefs lead to feelings of negative affect, which relate to poorer grades.

The completely standardized solution for the indirect model is presented in Figure 2. As shown, grades were predicted by negative mood ($\beta = -.49, p < .01$), which was predicted by belief in an unjust world ($\beta = .24, p < .05$). Children's perceptions of their parents' job insecurity predicted belief in an unjust world ($\beta = .23, p < .05$, one-tailed). Finally, parents' job insecurity strongly predicted children's perceptions of their parents' job insecurity ($\beta = .64, p < .001$).

Discussion

We initially posited a model in which parents' experiences of job insecurity influence their children's grades through the indirect effects of belief in an unjust world and negative mood. The data provided a good fit to the model and a more parsimonious fit to the data than the null model. In addition, all the hypothesized paths in the model were statistically significant, which allow us to conclude that the original model was supported. In general, the idea that parents' work experiences, whether positive or negative, affect their children (Barling, 1990) and that these effects indirectly lead to negative mood (Barling & MacEwen, 1992)—and also in this case to beliefs in an unjust world—is again supported.

Our findings also extend earlier research on the specific effects of parents' experiences of job insecurity on their children in two ways. First, children's grade performance at school can also be indirectly affected by parents' job insecurity. Second, the effects of parents' job insecurity are transmitted through cognitive (e.g., belief in an unjust world) and affective mechanisms (e.g., negative mood), comple-

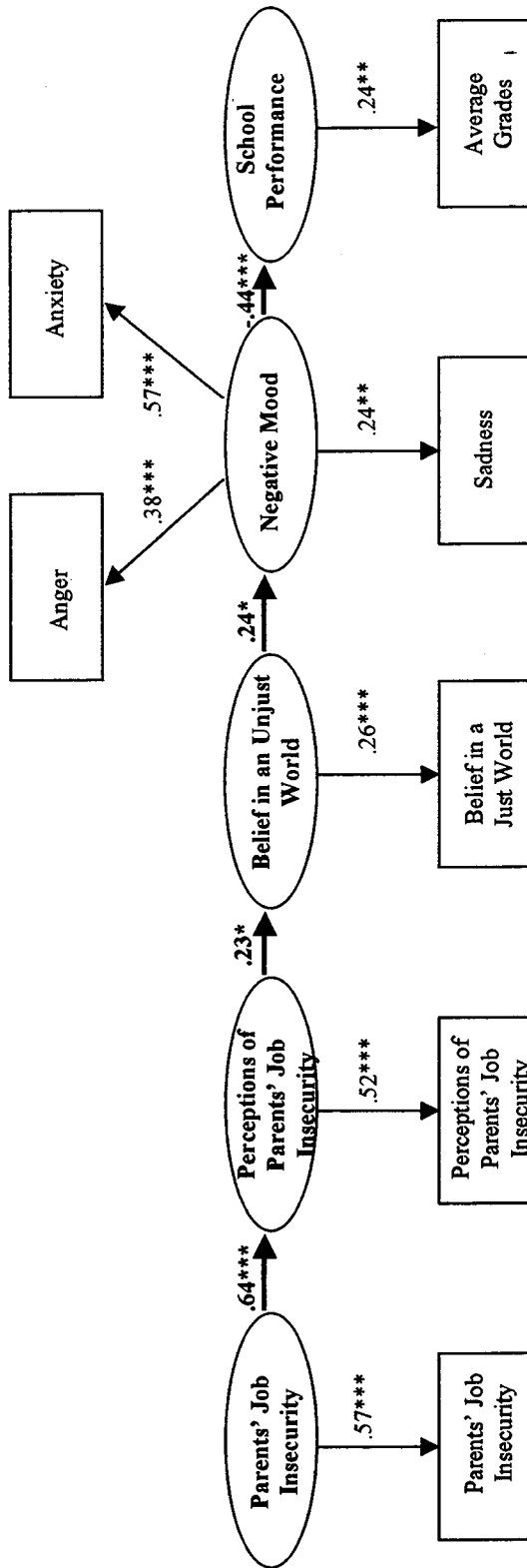


Figure 2. Results of LISREL 8 analyses linking parents' job insecurity and children's grades. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

menting (a) our recent findings that this effect can occur through cognitive difficulties (Barling et al., 1999) and (b) the general role accorded to negative mood as one way in which the negative effects of parents' work stress can influence their children. Given that organizational restructuring will continue, job insecurity will probably remain widespread for the foreseeable future despite any positive changes in the economy, and these findings begin to highlight some of the unintended negative consequences of job insecurity.

This study deviates from our previous research on job insecurity in at least one important respect. In previous research, we only focused on data provided by families in which both parents were employed. This necessarily limited our focus to intact marriages and dual-income earners, inadvertently sacrificing external validity. In the present research, our assumption was that children learn about job insecurity from either one or both parents to whom they are exposed, thereby increasing ecological validity and maximizing the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should continue to focus on the within-family effects of parents' job insecurity, to identify the full range of indirect processes and outcome variables. In any such endeavor, it would be worthwhile to incorporate both social (beliefs in an unjust world and negative mood) and cognitive (cognitive difficulties) factors as linking variables in a single omnibus test to address their relative importance. Similarly, future research should obtain a more comprehensive perspective of the nature of work stressors associated with job insecurity. For example, perceived injustice, feelings of contract violations, powerlessness, and job dissatisfaction may be likely in an environment characterized by job insecurity. Even more specifically, parents' feelings of perceived injustice may be particularly salient with respect to children's perceptions that the world is unjust.

At the same time, several factors that could potentially weaken the effects obtained in this study should be addressed. For example, we focused on university students who had already left home. Yet the effects of observing a parent's job insecurity may be more accurate, and more negative, were the child to be living with the parent and in a position to observe the parent directly on a daily basis. In addition, because mothers' and fathers' work-related experiences influence their sons and daughters differently (e.g., Barling et al., 1998; Steele & Barling, 1996), future research should disentangle the effects of mothers' and fathers' job-related insecurity so as not to dilute their effects. However, no gender differences

emerged on measures of beliefs in an unjust world, negative affect, or grades in the present study. Furthermore, the effects on children of parents working full or part time should also be addressed in future research. Unfortunately, a small sample size precluded this assessment in the present study.

Second, the conceptualization and operationalization of job insecurity requires some attention. Like Barling et al. (1998), we chose to focus on a unidimensional measure of job insecurity (Kuhnert & Vance, 1992). It might be worthwhile, however, to generate a measure of employment security (Kuhnert & Vance, 1992). This may be advantageous given that widespread promises of job security is unlikely in a market economy, yet most high performance work systems emphasize the importance of employment security (e.g., Pfeffer, 1996).

Third, as in previous research, the reliability of our measure of beliefs in an unjust world was modest (e.g., Hylan & Dolan, 1987), which limits the conclusions that we can make from our findings. Future research must ensure that more reliable measures of beliefs in an unjust world are used. At the same time, it is possible that a multidimensional approach (Harper, Wagstaff, Newton, & Harrison, 1990) to this construct might yield more information.

In studies of this nature investigating perceptions of parents' attitudes and children's own attitudes, monomethod bias emerges as a potential confound. Several methodological features of the present study limit the extent to which monomethod bias might influence the findings. First, data were obtained from two separate sources (namely, parents' and children's independent self-reports). Second, although grade performance was based on children's reports, their reports correlate substantially with actual records (Sandys-Wunsch, 1991). In addition, we used a short-term longitudinal study, in which data on grades were collected 3 months following other data collection, precluding the possibility that the direction of causal inference (e.g., that poor grade performance results in negative mood) is an issue.

In conclusion, this study shows that parents' job insecurity affects their children's grade performance at school, albeit indirectly. When children see their parents as insecure in their jobs, they view the world as unjust, which in turn leads to negative mood, and it is this negative mood that directly affects their grade performance. Given other research showing parents' job insecurity affects their children's work beliefs and attitudes (Barling et al., 1998) and cognitive difficulties and grade school performance (Barling et al., 1999), the full range of effects of parents' job

insecurity on other family members must now be confronted.

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