

## Effects of Parents' Job Insecurity on Children's Work Beliefs and Attitudes

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The authors hypothesized that children's perceptions of their parents' job insecurity mediate the effects of parental job insecurity and layoffs on children's work beliefs and work attitudes. Male and female undergraduate students ( $N = 134$ ;  $M$  age = 18.9 years), as well as their mothers ( $M$  age = 47.0 years) and fathers ( $M$  age = 49.1 years), participated voluntarily. With structural equation modeling as implemented by LISREL VIII, support for the proposed model was obtained, whereas no support was obtained for a competing model. Moreover, identification with fathers moderated the influence of perceived paternal job insecurity on children's humanistic work beliefs, but no comparable effect emerged for mothers.

In an attempt to cut costs, adapt to technological change, and become more profitable, organizations have engaged in widespread layoffs and downsizings in North America in the 1980s and 1990s (*The Downsizing of America*, 1996). These strategies are now being questioned because of empirical evidence suggesting that these aims are not necessarily achieved (DeMeuse, Vanderheiden, & Bergmann, 1994). However, the fact that downsizing frequently does not accomplish its purpose is only one of the many questionable ramifications arising from the increase in downsizing.

Another question arising from the increase in downsizing involves its possible effects on the family. There is an abundance of evidence showing a consistent link between the experience of work and family functioning (i.e., Barling, 1990, 1992, 1994). One critical finding is that when children see their parents involved in, and satisfied with, their work, their well-being is enhanced, and they develop positive work attitudes (Abramovitch & Johnson, 1992; Barling, 1990, 1992; Barling, Kelloway, & Bremermann, 1991; Flanagan & Eccles, 1993; Kelloway & Watts,

1994; Piotrkowski & Stark, 1987). However, most of these data were collected during times of relative organizational stability, when job insecurity was less of a chronic concern (Barling & Sorensen, 1997). What remains to be understood is whether and how parental experiences of job insecurity affect children, and the aim of the present study was to address these questions.

Job insecurity reflects the degree to which employees perceive their job to be threatened and feel powerless to do anything about it (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989). Job insecurity affects employees' own well-being (e.g., anger, cynicism, and reduced satisfaction) and work functioning (e.g., lower job performance, lower morale, distrust of management, and lower work motivation; Ashford et al., 1989; Barling, 1994; Brockner, 1988; O'Neill & Lenn, 1995). In addition, the effects of job insecurity go beyond the insecure employee: Children of parents experiencing insecurity manifest social and school-related problems (Flanagan & Eccles, 1993; Stewart & Barling, 1996).

Children routinely observe their parents' reactions to their work. There are data showing that by the third and fourth grade, children know where their parents work, know what work their parents do, and are aware of their parents' job satisfaction (Abramovitch & Johnson, 1992; Kelloway & Watts, 1994; Piotrkowski & Stark, 1987). Thus, we predicted that when children see their parents experiencing layoffs and job insecurity, they develop perceptions of their parents' job insecurity. In turn, children are influenced by their perceptions of how their parents experience their work (Barling et al., 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994). In this study, we focus on how perceptions of parents' job insecurity influence children's work beliefs and work attitudes (see Figure 1).

How work beliefs and attitudes develop has been of

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Portions of this research were supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Imperial Oil Charitable Foundation, and the School of Business, Queen's University. We acknowledge constructive comments from E. Kevin Kelloway.

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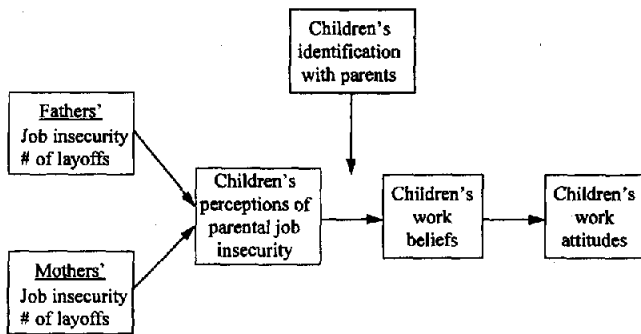


Figure 1. Path model predicting the effects of parents' job insecurity on children's work beliefs and attitudes.

interest for some time (Barling et al., 1991; Furnham, 1990; Kelloway & Watts, 1994; Loughlin & Barling, in press), and there are now data isolating the role of family socialization. Barling et al. (1991) showed that the extent to which teenagers perceive their parents to have participated in union activities predicts their own humanistic and Marxist work beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Kelloway and Watts (1994) extended these findings, showing that perceptions of parents' work beliefs influence teenage children's work beliefs. Any preemployment influences on the development of work beliefs and attitudes are important for several reasons: First, work beliefs serve to clarify and simplify people's views of the world of work (Buchholz, 1978); in this sense, work beliefs function as a perceptual filter through which work experiences are interpreted. Second, attitudes in general are most susceptible to change during adolescence and early adulthood; susceptibility to attitude change declines rapidly thereafter (Krosnick & Alwyn, 1989). For example, union attitudes are relatively stable, even in the face of intense and sometimes illegal campaigning (Getman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1976).

In this study, we suggest that perceiving parents' job insecurity is negatively associated with both the Protestant and the humanistic work belief. There are several reasons for this. First, the Protestant work belief reflects the notion that work is inherently good and that hard work can ensure that obstacles can be overcome (Buchholz, 1978). Students who see their parents losing their jobs or experiencing job insecurity despite their parents' best efforts are unlikely to sustain the belief either that hard work is inherently good or that hard work can protect one's current job. Second, the humanistic work belief suggests that people can be fulfilled through their work; whether they are depends on the quality of the work experience. Watching their parents lose their jobs or suffer from job insecurity is unlikely to lead children to believe that people can be fulfilled through their work and that work is a potential source of growth and development. Third, prior research has shown that perceptions of parents' work experiences

affect children's own work beliefs (Barling et al., 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994).

Consistent with Barling et al.'s (1991) finding that Marxist work beliefs predict union attitudes, our model (see Figure 1) further postulates that students' work beliefs predict their work-related attitudes, that is, their own motivation to, and alienation from, work. When students have low humanistic work beliefs (i.e., they believe that work is inherently bad or that work itself is not fulfilling) or a low Protestant work ethic (i.e., they believe that their own efforts will not necessarily lead to success), we expect that they experience lower motivation to work and greater alienation from work.

In this study, we hypothesized that any effects of perceptions of parents' job insecurity on children's own work beliefs would not be uniform across all children. Instead, this relationship would be moderated by the extent to which children identify with the parent. Presumably, any effects of a parent's job insecurity would be greater if children identify closely with the parent. There is some support for this notion. Kelloway, Barling, and Agar (1996) found that parental union attitudes and involvement were stronger predictors of children's union attitudes when the child identified strongly with the parent. Similarly, daughters' identification with their mothers moderated the relationship between perceptions of their mothers' and their own gender-role ideology (Steele & Barling, 1996).

Finally, because the fit of one model does not preclude alternative models from fitting the data as well, or better than, the proposed model, we also assessed the goodness of fit of an alternative model. In the alternative model, work beliefs and work attitudes are held to be predicted simultaneously by perceptions of parents' job insecurity and layoffs.

## Method

### Participants

Two hundred introductory psychology students (139 women, 61 men) initially volunteered to participate in this study for course credit. Participants were 20 years of age or younger, and both parents were currently employed but not self-employed. The age limit was imposed in an attempt to ensure that participants were still influenced by their parents.

<sup>1</sup> According to the humanistic work belief perspective, work reflects one fundamental avenue by which people can fulfill themselves. The fact that work is basic to human fulfillment is acknowledged within the Marxist work belief; however, as currently organized work does not allow for such fulfillment because of exploitation, to overcome this, workers need more control in the workplace. The work ethic (or "Protestant" work ethic) suggests that work in itself is good and bestows dignity on those who have work (Buchholz, 1978).

Materials

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

*Parents' self-reported job insecurity.* We assessed this variable with Kuhnert and Vance's (1992) 18-item job insecurity measure. Respondents rated all 18 items (e.g., "I can be sure of my present job as long as I do good work"; reverse coded) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Previous studies have shown the scale to be internally consistent ( $\alpha = .70$ , see Kuhnert & Vance, 1992;  $\alpha = .80$ , Stewart & Barling, 1996). High scores reflect job insecurity. Parents were also asked to indicate the number of times they had been laid off in the past 20 years, and a total layoff score was obtained by summing across these time periods.

*Students' work beliefs.* We used 14 of Mirels and Garrett's (1971) 19 items to measure humanistic work beliefs (Buchholz, 1978). Five items (item numbers 2, 5, 13, 14, and 18) were excluded, as their inclusion left the scale with a reliability less than .70. Nineteen items from Mirels and Garrett's questionnaire (1971) measured Protestant work beliefs. The response format for both work belief scales was a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). High scores indicate stronger belief.

*Students' work attitudes.* We measured motivation to do good work using Stern, Stone, Hopkins, and McMillion's (1990) eight-item scale; each item has a four-point response scale (*strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree*). High scores represent more motivation to work. Alienation was measured with Kanungo's (1982) six-item scale. This scale has a 6-point Likert-type response format (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). High scores indicate more alienation at work.

*Identification with parents.* We assessed this variable with a revision of MacEwen's (1991) scale. Three items were taken directly from this scale. A fourth item ("I share common beliefs and attitudes with my father/mother") was included in this study to balance the extent to which the scale assesses perceptions of physical and interpersonal characteristics. The response scale was a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all true*; 7 = *very true*). Students completed two sets of questions, one pertaining to their mothers and the other to their fathers. High scores indicate greater identification with parents.

*Students' perceptions of each parent's job insecurity.* We assessed this variable with a revised version of Kuhnert and Vance's (1992) 18-item Job Insecurity Questionnaire. Each item was reworded for the current study to correspond to students' perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' job insecurity. Students were asked to complete this questionnaire twice, that is, separately for their mothers' and fathers' job insecurity. Students responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). High scores on the scale reflect perception of high job insecurity.

Procedure

Following the completion of the questionnaire in groups of approximately 35, outside of regular class times, the 200 students were asked if they would be willing to send questionnaires to their parents. Thirty students declined and therefore were

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

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Fathers' JI <sup>a</sup>	2.69	0.71	(.87)											
2. Mothers' JI <sup>a</sup>	2.76	0.59	.16	(.81)										
3. Fathers' layoffs	0.97	2.46	.20	.09										
4. Mothers' layoffs	0.43	1.31	.06	.23**	.03									
5. Perceptions of fathers' JI <sup>a</sup>	2.27	0.73	.48**	.24**	.35**	.09	(.90)							
6. Perceptions of mothers' JI <sup>a</sup>	2.44	0.66	-.04	.48**	-.04	.18*	.23**	(.87)						
7. Protestant work ethic <sup>b</sup>	3.27	0.42	-.17	-.08	-.01	.14	-.25**	.02	(.72)					
8. Humanistic work belief <sup>b</sup>	4.71	0.37	-.17	-.02	-.03	.02	-.25**	-.02	.34**	(.79)				
9. Motivation <sup>c</sup>	3.31	0.37	-.21*	-.04	.02	-.04	-.16	.06	.34**	.57**	(.70)			
10. Alienation <sup>d</sup>	3.92	0.71	.10	.02	-.01	.00	.08	-.02	-.42**	-.21**	-.32**	(.71)		
11. Identification with fathers <sup>e</sup>	4.57	1.22	.03	.06	-.07	.11	.07	-.01	-.17*	-.13*	-.02	.09	(.83)	
12. Identification with mothers <sup>e</sup>	4.65	1.32	-.07	-.21*	.08	.05	.00	-.03	.11	.17*	.18*	-.17	-.07	(.86)

Note. JI = job insecurity. Cronbach's alpha appears on the diagonal in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> Response format: 1-5 (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*; 4 = *agree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). <sup>b</sup> Response format: 1-5 (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *mildly disagree*; 3 = *neutral*; 4 = *mildly agree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). <sup>c</sup> Response format: 1-4 (1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *agree*; 4 = *strongly agree*). <sup>d</sup> Response format: 1-6 (1 = *strongly agree*; 2 = *agree*; 3 = *mildly agree*; 4 = *mildly disagree*; 5 = *disagree*; 6 = *strongly disagree*). <sup>e</sup> Response format: 1-7 (1 = *not at all true*; 7 = *very true*). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

excluded from the study. Each of the remaining 170 students was asked to write a short note to both his or her mother and father, asking that they both take part in the present study. Of these 340 parents, 294 responded (response rate = 86%). Because this study was investigating the effects of *both* parents on children, the data could be used for a student only if both parents returned their questionnaires. Thus, of the 294 returned questionnaires, 26 were excluded leaving 134 full data sets. The mean age of these children was 18.9 years ( $SD = 4$ , range = 17–20). The sample included 103 female students and 30 male students (one unstated). Of the fathers in the current study ( $M$  age = 49.1 years,  $SD = 4.0$ ), 20% had been laid off within the last 5 years, and 44% had been laid off at least once within the last 20 years. Of the mothers ( $M$  age = 47.0,  $SD = 3.8$ ), 11% had been laid off within the last 5 years, and 26% had been laid off at least once within the last 20 years.

### Results

Fathers experienced significantly more layoffs than mothers,  $t(133) = 2.27, p < .05$ , but manifested no differences in self-reported levels of job insecurity,  $t(133) = -1.01, p > .05$ . However, students perceived their mothers' job insecurity as significantly higher than their fathers' job insecurity (see Table 1).

We conducted tests for gender differences and used the pooled variance estimate of the  $t$  test. Gender differences were found for two of the eight self-report measures. Female students ( $M = 4.75, SD = 0.33$ ) reported significantly higher humanistic work beliefs than their male counterparts ( $M = 4.59, SD = 0.49$ ),  $t(132) = 2.16, p < .05$ . In contrast, male students reported greater identification with their fathers than did female students ( $M = 4.99, SD = 1.29$  vs.  $M = 4.45, SD = 1.18$ , respectively),  $t(132) = 2.17, p < .05$ .

We tested the proposed model with structural equation modeling using maximum likelihood estimation in LISREL VIII (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). The covariance matrix was used in all LISREL VIII analyses. We used the humanistic and Protestant work beliefs as indicators of the latent variable *work beliefs*, and motivation and alienation were used as indicators of the latent variable *work attitudes*. The remaining variables in the model were treated as single indicators of latent variables in an attempt to account for measurement error. Thus, unique variances of these variables were fixed at the product of  $(1 - \text{reliability of the measure})$  and the variance, and the common factor loading was equal to the product of the square root of the reliability and the standard deviation. We were not able to calculate reliabilities for the variables reflecting the objective number of maternal and paternal layoffs and conservatively estimated a reliability coefficient of 0.80 for these measures.

This proposed model offered a fair but not outstanding fit to the data,  $\chi^2(28, N = 134) = 46.85, p < .05$ ; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .94, adjusted goodness-of-fit

index (AGFI) = .87. Two fit indexes comparing the fit of the data with that of a null model were also used: normative fit index (NFI) = .81, comparative fit index (CFI) = .91. The CFI provides a better indication of model fit when dealing with smaller samples.

Because of the significant correlation between students' perceptions of their mothers' and their fathers' job insecurity ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), we allowed these two single-indicator latent variables to covary. This greatly improved the fit of the model to the data,  $\chi^2(27, N = 134) = 38.09, p > .05$ ; GFI = .95, AGFI = .89, NFI = .85, CFI = .95, and the completely standardized solution for this model is presented in Figure 2. Although the model provided a good fit to the data, not all proposed paths were significant. Specifically, although mothers' self-reported job insecurity predicted students' perceptions of their mothers' job insecurity, the number of layoffs that mothers had experienced did not predict student perception of the mothers' job insecurity. In addition, students' perceptions of mothers' job insecurity did not predict work beliefs.

In the alternative model, in which the two single-indicator latent variables of students' perceptions of their mothers' and their fathers' job insecurity were allowed to covary, work beliefs and work attitudes were both predicted simultaneously by students' perceptions of fathers' and mothers' job insecurity. This model provided a poor fit to the data,  $\chi^2(26, N = 134) = 89.74, p < .05$ ; GFI = .90, AGFI = .78, NFI = .64, CFI = .69.<sup>2</sup>

To test our hypothesis that identification with parents would moderate the relationships between perceptions of mothers' and fathers' job insecurity on work beliefs, we computed four multiple regression analyses. Predictor and moderator variables were entered on the first step. Because multicollinearity may obscure such interaction effects, we followed Aiken and West's (1991) procedure: Parental identification and perceptions of job insecurity were centered around zero (i.e., the mean of each variable was subtracted from every score) prior to testing for interaction effects. Centering predictor and moderator variables adds meaning to the results, because we can then estimate the strength of the relationship at the mean of parental identification (i.e.,  $M = 0$ ). An interaction term, computed by multiplying the predictor and moderator variables, was entered in the second step. If the change in  $R^2$  between the first and second step is significant, identification with the parent moderates the relationship between perceptions of parents' job insecurity on work beliefs. However, analyses of data from field studies indicate that interactions typically account for less than 3% of the variance. In addition, because of difficulties associated with assessing interaction terms on data derived in field

<sup>2</sup> A figure reflecting the results obtained for the alternative model is available from Julian Barling on request.

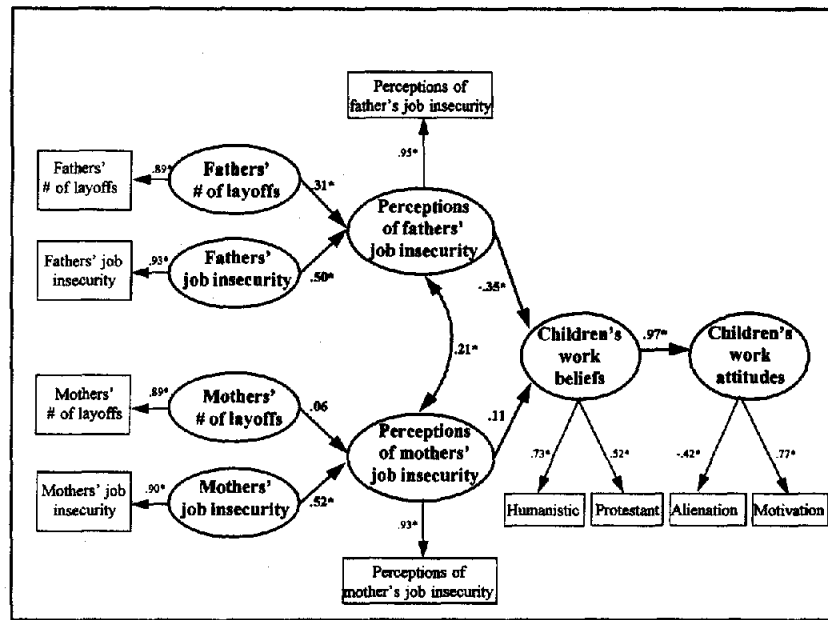


Figure 2. Effects of parents' job insecurity on children's work beliefs and attitudes.

research, we examined any interaction accounting for more than 2% of the variance. Both Monte Carlo and field studies support this more liberal approach to analyzing interaction effects (Barling & Kelloway, 1996; Champoux & Peters, 1987; Evans, 1985).

None of the interactions for mothers were significant. For fathers, the interaction between identification with fathers and perceptions of paternal job insecurity approached significance for humanistic work beliefs ( $p = .06$ ; 2% of the variance accounted for). Thus, the simple slopes for this relationship were examined following the procedure outlined by Aiken and West (1991), and the relationships between perceptions of paternal job insecurity and the humanistic beliefs were then calculated for parental identification at one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean. Humanistic beliefs were strongly and negatively related to perceptions of fathers' job insecurity when identification with the father was high ( $\beta = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The same relationship was slightly lower at the mean of paternal identification ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not statistically significant when identification with the father was low ( $\beta = -.11$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

### Discussion

The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate whether and how parents' feelings of job insecurity and history of personal layoffs affect their children's work beliefs and work attitudes. On the basis of previous research (Barling et al., 1991; Kelloway & Watts, 1994),

we postulated a model in which children who watch their parents experiencing layoffs and insecurity perceive this insecurity and develop negative work beliefs that then predict their work-related attitudes. This model provided a good fit to the data. In contrast, an alternative model in which work beliefs and work attitudes were predicted simultaneously by children's perceptions of parents' job insecurity was not supported by the data.

The finding that paternal job insecurity and layoffs are accurately perceived by children and affect their own work beliefs and attitudes has several conceptual implications. First, the notion that work experiences (e.g., job insecurity) rather than employment status affect family functioning (e.g., Barling, 1990, 1992) is replicated. Second, family stressors are again shown to exert negative consequences for children (i.e., D'Angelo, Weinberger, & Feldman, 1995). Third, because attitudes are relatively stable after late adolescence and early adulthood (Krosnick & Alwyn, 1989), any understanding of the preemployment predictors of work beliefs and work attitudes is important. If these work beliefs and attitudes are indeed stable, we may soon be witnessing large groups of young people entering the work world with preexisting negative work beliefs and attitudes, which may not be amenable to change. Fourth, the relative effects of parents' job insecurity and number of layoffs can be contrasted. Children's perceptions of both their parents' job insecurity were influenced more by parents' job insecurity than number of layoffs experienced (fathers:  $\beta = 0.50$  vs. 0.31; mothers:  $\beta = 0.52$  vs. 0.06). This suggests strongly that findings

on the effects of unemployment on children need to be augmented by an understanding of the effects of parental job insecurity.

These findings go further in identifying conditions that moderate the relationship between perceptions of parents' job insecurity and work beliefs. Specifically, this relationship was stronger when students identified more strongly with their fathers, and this is consistent with previous data on the role of parental identification (Kelloway et al., 1996; Steele & Barling, 1996). One implication of this finding is somewhat ironic: Emery (1982) suggested earlier that a positive relationship with one parent might buffer children from any negative effects of parental conflict. Our findings, and those of Kelloway et al. (1996) and Steele and Barling (1996), question this notion, suggesting instead that a close identification with a parent experiencing stress might be harmful for the child. However, future research is warranted before any definitive conclusions are appropriate because the moderating effect emerged for the relationship between perceptions of fathers' job insecurity and students' own humanistic beliefs but did not emerge for mothers.

Although the proposed model was shown to fit the data, we should note that two predicted relationships were not supported by the data, namely perceptions of mothers' job insecurity was not related to either the number of layoffs mothers had experienced or to students' work beliefs. Two factors may account for this. First, range restriction is a possible factor, as fathers had experienced twice as many layoffs, and the standard deviation of fathers' layoffs was twice as high as the corresponding score for mothers (see Table 1). The second possibility arises because fathers are probably seen in more of a breadwinning role, and hence their layoffs may be perceived as more consequential. It is also worth noting the nonnormal distribution nature of the data reflecting the number of layoffs experienced (fathers: skewness = 4.45, kurtosis = 23.08; mothers: skewness = 5.48, kurtosis = 37.38).

One limitation in the current research is that we do not know the proportion of children from intact versus reconstituted marriages, and it would be important for future research to assess whether children are differentially affected by natural parents' versus stepparents' job insecurity. Second, like much of the literature in the work and family domain, which focuses predominantly on "traditional families" despite the many people today who no longer fit into the traditional nuclear family stereotype (Barling & Sorensen, 1997), we excluded single-parent families. This may limit the generalizability of our findings, as single parents may have less access to social support, while simultaneously experiencing greater financial strain, both of which could exacerbate any effects of job insecurity and layoffs on children (Barling & Sorensen, 1997). Future research should investigate the in-

fluence of mothers' job insecurity in settings where women are the primary family income providers. This would enable an assessment of whether the current findings differentiating between perceptions of mothers' and fathers' job insecurity is a function of gender per se or of the breadwinner role. Future research might also focus on other outcomes that may be affected by watching one's parents experiencing layoffs and job insecurity, such as academic performance, social behaviors, and union attitudes.

In conclusion, the present findings contribute significantly to the current understanding of work and family. In general these findings show how parents' experiences of layoffs and job insecurity affect their children. The current findings also question whether current organizational practices might result in greater numbers of young people entering the world of work with pessimistic work beliefs and attitudes.

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Received November 8, 1996

Revision received August 18, 1997

Accepted August 18, 1997 ■