




Social well-being at work: The effect of job insecurity and different foci of trust



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Orientation: Understanding the connection between job insecurity and trust is vital for enhancing workplace social well-being.

Research purpose: This study examined the effect of organisational and interpersonal trust and job uncertainty on the social well-being of workers in a volatile and culturally diverse workplace context in South Africa.

Motivation for the study: Gaining insight into how positive (trust) and negative (job insecurity) factors affect employees' social well-being in culturally diverse workplaces is crucial. Such understanding can inform human resource strategies and promote the sustainability of organisations.

Research approach/design and method: A quantitative research methodology was employed, utilising a cross-sectional survey design. A total of 403 permanent employees from various positions within a utility organisation in South Africa completed a structured questionnaire.

Main findings: Trust in the organisational entity and in co-workers enhanced social well-being, with trust in the organisation having a greater effect. Job insecurity reduced social well-being directly and indirectly through diminished organisational trust.

Practical/managerial implications: Managers should prioritise building trust within the organisation and among colleagues to enhance social well-being, emphasising transparent communication, consistent leadership and support programmes. Addressing job insecurity is also essential, as it reduces social well-being by affecting organisational trust.

Contribution/value-add: This study deepened our understanding of how trust and job insecurity are related to social well-being at work. It contributed by exploring social well-being in an underexplored African public sector setting, offering insights for developing policies and human resource management strategies to enhance organisational sustainability.

Keywords: employee relationships; social well-being; trust; job insecurity; employees; organisational sustainability.

Introduction

Workplaces are highly dependent on functional interpersonal relationships, which significantly influence role players across various work contexts, hierarchies and roles (Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Klug et al., 2024). The quality of these relationships – whether positive or lacking – affects employees' overall well-being and organisational outcomes.

Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological and social levels of overall well-being (Keyes et al., 2008). An individual's subjective assessment of their social relationships and others' reactions to them reflect their social well-being, a key component of overall health (Keyes, 1998, 2013, 2025). Social well-being is characterised by positive interpersonal relations, social support, trust and perceptions of fairness, and it interacts with physical and psychological well-being to form a comprehensive picture of health (Björk et al., 2022; Guest, 2017; Keyes, 2013, 2025).

Research demonstrates that positive work relationships enhance employee well-being, job attitudes and performance (Daniels et al., 2017; Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023; Hilbrink, 2022; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Mathibe & Chinyamurindi, 2021). These relationships provide emotional support, facilitate information sharing, foster innovation, aid problem-solving and promote intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction. These benefits extend to organisational performance, influencing productivity and financial outcomes (Jämsen et al., 2022; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Management studies further highlight that work environments satisfy basic psychological needs for relatedness, social bonds, relevance and belonging (Ashleigh et al., 2012; Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).

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However, contemporary organisational structures increasingly limit opportunities for social interaction and support networks. Trends such as hybrid work models, work intensification without adequate support and technological advances that enable flexible, yet impersonal interactions contribute to this challenge (Guest, 2017; Jämsen et al., 2022). These changes raise new research questions about how social well-being can be effectively supported and prompt human resources (HR) practitioners and researchers to revisit traditional practices and policies (Björk et al., 2022; Guest, 2017; Tabor-Błażewicz, 2023).

As the global workforce becomes more diverse, it is valuable to incorporate perspectives from non-Western cultural contexts. For example, many employees from African sociocultural backgrounds view social and community embeddedness as fundamental to their identity (Hennicks et al., 2022; Khumalo et al., 2021). Understanding these cultural nuances can provide a more comprehensive view of the factors influencing social well-being in diverse work environments (Khumalo et al., 2021).

Despite its importance, research on the determinants of social well-being within work environments remains limited (Colenberg et al., 2021; Tabor-Błażewicz, 2023). Specifically, studies focusing on African workplaces, including South Africa, are scarce (Khumalo et al., 2021; Marozova & Pelser, 2025). A preliminary literature review indicates a notable absence of research explicitly examining the predictive factors of social well-being in African organisational settings.

Trust is a fundamental element of effective work relationships at both individual and organisational levels (Adam & Donelson, 2020; Ashleigh et al., 2012; Bligh, 2017). It is linked to positive workplace outcomes such as loyalty, dedication, organisational identification and overall employee health (Jaškevičiūtė et al., 2021; Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021). Both interpersonal trust among colleagues and impersonal trust directed at the organisation are likely to influence social well-being directly.

Trust involves risk assessment, as it requires accepting vulnerability without certainty of positive outcomes (Chung et al., 2024; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Mayer et al., 2015). When trust is directed towards the organisation as a collective, this risk becomes more complex, especially amid unpredictable futures (Chung et al., 2024). Perceived job insecurity – a prevalent psychological risk – can impact trust levels and, consequently, social well-being (Van Dam et al., 2020). Understanding how job insecurity influences trust and social well-being is crucial, yet current research on these dynamics remains limited.

In sum, the impact of precarity, particularly job insecurity, and various forms of trust on employees' social well-being has not been thoroughly examined. There is a notable lack of studies exploring how perceived job insecurity influences social well-being through trust, especially within African workplaces. Addressing this gap is

essential for developing effective interventions and policies to support employee well-being in increasingly uncertain organisational environments.

The current study

This study aims to explore the relationships between subjectively perceived job insecurity, organisational and interpersonal trust and the social well-being of employees within a South African-based utility company.

The organisation of interest is positioned within the top 20 utility companies globally within its sector; it plays a crucial role in the production of power for the African continent, and it performs functions that are essential for the economic sustainability of South Africa. However, the company is highly volatile as it struggles to meet demands and faces dramatic structural obstacles and risk of retrenchments (Folly, 2021). To fulfil its mandate, employees are subject to protracted phases of restructuring. The larger sociopolitical context has also contributed to volatility, and the organisation continues to face major challenges to ensure sustainable, reliable service delivery to the public (Mjambana, 2024).

Our research makes the following contributions: firstly, it enhances our understanding of both the positive (trust) and negative (job insecurity) factors that can affect employees' social well-being at work, and secondly, it explores how these influences may possibly interact to produce a combined effect. Thirdly, it augments the existing knowledge base by studying social well-being within a previously underexplored public sector workplace context on the African continent where employees from both individualistic and (predominantly) collectivistic cultural orientations work together in teams. The findings can lead to improved policies and human resource management strategies that can potentially affect the quality-of-service delivery and sustainability of an organisation that is of critical strategic importance to the African continent.

Prior to the development of hypotheses, the next section will provide definitions of the main constructs: social well-being, job insecurity and trust.

Literature review

Social well-being

Social well-being representing 'the appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society' (Keyes, 1998, p. 5) is regarded as a critical component of an individual's overall well-being, along with physical and mental well-being, and concerns the employee's experiences and functioning in the workplace (Guest, 2017).

Keyes (2013) distinguishes between five sub-components of social health: Social acceptance, social actualisation, social integration, social contribution and social coherence. Socially accepting individuals 'hold favourable views of

human nature and generally feel comfortable with others' (Keyes, 2013, p. 9). They also tend to be trusting and think people can be kind. Social actualisation pertains to the perception that society possesses inherent potential that is actualised through its institutions and the active participation of its inhabitants. Social integration represents a sense of belonging or 'the extent to which people feel they have something in common with others who constitute their social reality' (Keyes, 2013, p. 9). Social contribution reflects the belief that one has something of value to offer. Social coherence is akin to meaningfulness; it refers to how individuals perceive the order, organisation and functioning of their social environment (Keyes, 1998, 2013).

Job insecurity

Despite numerous definitions of job insecurity that have emerged over time, a still frequently referenced definition characterises job insecurity as 'the perceived threat of job loss and the worries related to that threat' (De Witte, 2005, p. 1). This definition highlights the subjective aspect of job insecurity, suggesting that individuals may evaluate their job security differently, even when facing similar situations (Van Dam et al., 2020).

Although job insecurity is mostly considered a unidimensional construct, alternative views distinguish between quantitative and qualitative job insecurity (Van Dam et al., 2020). While quantitative insecurity denotes the sustainability of a person's work, qualitative insecurity refers to the continued existence of valued job characteristics (Van Dam et al., 2020).

Brondino et al. (2020) further refine the qualitative aspect of job insecurity by building on a framework that distinguishes four components that may all contribute towards the subjective experience of job insecurity, namely job content, employment conditions, social relationships and working.

While researchers have varying definitions of job insecurity, they generally agree on several key characteristics associated with it, which can be summarised as follows: job insecurity is a complex personal perception about employees' employment situation. It is involuntary and involves concerns about the future, including cognitive aspects (perceived job loss) and emotional worries. While these elements can be distinguished theoretically, they often overlap in real life. Ultimately, job insecurity reflects the unwanted possibility of losing one's job and the fears that accompany it (Klug et al., 2024; Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021; Van der Elst et al., 2014).

Trust

Trust involves a readiness to act under conditions of uncertainty where positive outcomes cannot necessarily be guaranteed (Ferres & Travaglione, 2003). A well-known definition that has been widely accepted across disciplines refers to trust as the willingness to accept vulnerability to another person and hoping the other will behave as expected and in a trustworthy manner (Mayer et al., 1995).

Fulmer and Gelfand (2012, p. 1174) build further on this by defining organisational trust as 'a psychological state comprising of the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of an organisation'.

According to Chung et al. (2024, p. 3), the difference between these two forms of trust is that, in the case of organisational trust, the referent is not a person, but a collective system, in which case 'the source of vulnerability and risk is broader and more diffuse'. Nevertheless, both interpersonal trust and organisational trust are derived from clues regarding the referent's perceived competence, integrity and benevolence (Di Stefano et al., 2018; Ferrin & Gillespie, 2010).

The literature still offers diverging views regarding where efforts to build trust should best be concentrated: should they primarily be focused on the horizontal, interpersonal level or on the more impersonal level of the organisation as an entity?

Wasti and Önder (2021) contend that trust in organisations is more crucial than trust among individuals because of the increasingly complex nature of work environments. These environments now heavily depend on virtual communication, and many industries face operational challenges that limit opportunities for face-to-face interactions. This shift has led to greater reliance on temporary virtual teams, which can affect interpersonal trust levels. Conversely, the argument could be made that, in unstable political and economic situations, particularly in developing countries, the workforce may not expect consistent relationships with their employers and often turn to personal connections for support and security (Van Dam et al., 2020). As a result, interpersonal trust becomes the primary factor in the employment relationship. A study conducted by Ferrin and Gillespie (2010) highlighted significant trust differences across national societal cultures, revealing that certain factors influencing trust were specific to different cultures. These included preferences for power distance and broader national factors such as the effectiveness, governance quality and ethnic homogeneity of formal institutions.

To further advance trust research, studies that simultaneously investigate both impersonal and interpersonal trust within a unified research framework are needed (Searle & Al-Sharif, 2021). Specifically, there is a need to clarify how trust influences HR policies and on which level these policies should focus to maximise trust cultivation (Searle & Al-Sharif, 2021). Wasti and Önder (2021), furthermore, note that while trust in managers has been studied extensively, research on employee trust in organisations remains limited. They stress the importance of understanding how organisational trust enhances employee effectiveness. This study advances the trust literature by considering the simultaneous role of trust in colleagues and in the organisation within the same study and specifically by considering these as potential indirect mechanisms through which job insecurity influences social well-being at work.

Interrelationships between job uncertainty, social well-being and two trust referents

Job uncertainty and its relationship to social health

Employment instabilities are harmful to organisations and individuals (Van Dam et al., 2020; Van der Elst et al., 2014) and can be just as severe as those caused by unemployment itself (Aliyev, 2022). Previous research has amply demonstrated that both qualitative job insecurity and quantitative job insecurity not only are associated with poor mental well-being but also appear to be a causally related threat to 'general' well-being, including at work, even though findings for qualitative job insecurity seem to be more consistent in this regard (De Witte et al., 2016; Richter & Näswall, 2019; Van Dam et al., 2020). Concerns about losing one's job tend to evoke negative emotional reactions and often lead to social withdrawal; diminished social contact obstructs satisfaction of the need for relatedness, which, in turn, may decrease social well-being (Aliyev, 2022):

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Subjective job insecurity is inversely related to employee social well-being.

Trust in relation to social well-being

Trust in the organisational entity is essential for positive employee-employer relationships (Richter & Näswall, 2019; Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021). When employees trust their organisation, they most likely identify with what it stands for and believe they have something in common with others in their work community. Feeling part of a larger social structure promotes a sense of belonging and social integration, which enables better functioning (Amorim-Ribeiro et al., 2022; Hennicks et al., 2024). Organisational trust may also promote a sense of psychological safety and stability, which promotes focus, productive performance, collaboration with colleagues and goal achievement; these factors hold the promise of social actualisation and professional fulfilment (Amorim-Ribeiro et al., 2022; Keyes, 1998). Such individuals may enjoy the benefits of well-being not only in terms of work engagement, job satisfaction and supportive relationships (Jaškevičiūtė et al., 2021) but also in terms of social coherence and social contribution because they are likely to believe that their work is meaningful, valued and respected, since they are positively contributing to the common good (Hennicks et al., 2024):

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Organisational trust is positively related to social well-being.

The quality of social exchange relationships among individuals in the workplace is also highly dependent on trust. Fair and respectful treatment by managers enhances employees' trust, thereby increasing the likelihood of their engaging in social exchanges (Downey et al., 2015). Trust nurtures followers' confidence to disclose, which enables managers to support their needs better and, thereby, their autonomous functioning (Bligh, 2017; Hennicks et al., 2024; Jungert et al., 2022), which, in turn, may promote their social actualisation.

Trust among colleagues fosters respectful and effective communication, fair conduct, mutual support and willingness

to collaborate, which promote motivation and work performance that benefit both individuals and the organisation (Tabor-Bła ewicz, 2023). Where interpersonal trust among employees exists, it offers a supportive work climate (Björk et al., 2022), which reduces stress and advances a sense of control, job satisfaction and social cohesion because members feel valued and connected (Marozva & Pelsler, 2025). Furthermore, high trust among colleagues helps break down barriers among team members from diverse backgrounds and reduces prejudice in favour of a common work identity, promoting fairness, inclusivity and social integration (Chung et al., 2024; Tamilina & Tamilina, 2020):

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Interpersonal workplace trust is positively related to employee social well-being.

Indirect effects

On the one hand, precarious work environments create high levels of uncertainty, having a negative impact on trust and social well-being (Klug et al., 2024). Previous research has shown that stigma-based rejection negatively affects trust in others (Zhang et al., 2020).

On the other hand, trust is considered an engine driver of change (Adam & Donelson, 2020) that can potentially ease the stress associated with uncertainty. High levels of organisational trust enhance employee readiness for organisational changes, such as downsizing, even in the face of perceived powerlessness, and have a buffering effect that enables employees to better navigate change and adversity (Bligh, 2017; Richter & Näswall, 2019). Trust is particularly important when management delivers unfavourable news, as employees who trust their leaders tend to respond more positively, even when they receive disappointing news. Research has also shown that trust in senior leaders has a positive impact on team members' commitment to implementing changes (Bligh, 2017). Interpersonal trust among team members is equally important, for it nurtures supportive networks, team cohesion and resilience; in short, trust is a protective shield that can mitigate distress (Helliwell et al., 2016; Hilbrink, 2022).

Maintaining trust in a volatile work environment is challenging, as uncertainty can lead to increased risk aversion and diminished readiness to trust (Gustafsson et al., 2021). Job insecurity can signal a psychological contract breach, causing employees to question the policies, motives and transparency of the organisation. As they become sceptical about the commitment of the organisation to deliver on its implied obligations, they may begin to perceive the organisation as less reliable, and trust is diminished, which, in turn, can lead to disengagement, reduced social identification and increased feelings of languishing (Aliyev, 2022; Kim, 2019; Richter & Näswall, 2019; Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021; Van der Elst et al., 2014). In addition, job insecurity can generate fear and anxiety, depleting energy resources and resulting in maladaptive coping strategies, which may reduce team trust and lead to social withdrawal (Aliyev, 2022; Ashleigh et al., 2012; De Witte et al., 2016;

Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). In some cases, job insecurity may foster unhealthy competition among employees, undermining effective communication and teamwork. As trust is eroded, employees may hesitate to seek support from one another, leading to increased social isolation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Helliwell et al., 2016). Given the foregoing, it seems plausible that job insecurity indirectly affects the social aspect of employee well-being via organisational trust (Hypothesis 3a or H3a) and trust in co-workers (Hypothesis 3b or H3b).

Research design

A quantitative research approach was employed to collect numerical data at a single point in time from a specific study population. This approach is appropriate for preliminary investigation of relationships between variables that have not been previously documented (Spector, 2019).

Method

Participants

This study made secondary use of data collected for a larger project by the first author. The sample ($N = 403$) consisted of employees from all nine provinces and across various roles within a large utility organisation in South Africa. More than two-thirds of the study population classified themselves as black, while the white group made up nearly a quarter of the sample. The remaining groups were smaller in comparison, with the coloured and Indian groups each representing less than one-tenth of the total, and a very small fraction did not disclose their information.

The largest age group was between 31 and 40 years (38.7%), and the average tenure of service was at least 11 years.

Instruments

The *Social Well-being Scale* (Keyes, 1998) was used to assess social well-being on a six-point scale and according to the five dimensions of social well-being as described previously. Example items representing each of the five dimensions, respectively, are as follows: (1) '... during the past month, how often did you feel that people in your organisation are basically good?'; (2) '... during the past month at work, how often did you feel that you really belong to your organisation?'; (3) '... during the past month, how often did you feel that you had something important to contribute towards your organisation?'; (4) '... during the past month at work, how often did you feel that your organisation is becoming a better place for people like you?' and (5) '... during the past month, how often did you feel that the way your organisation works, makes sense to you?'. A previous South African study employing this scale reported a reliability score of 0.92 (Hennicks et al., 2022).

The eight-item *Multidimensional Qualitative Job Insecurity Scale* (MQJIS) developed by Brondino et al. (2020) was used to measure job insecurity on a seven-point scale while differentiating between four subdimensions, namely

relationships, employment conditions, working conditions and work content. Example items for the respective dimensions are: 'I am not sure which colleagues I will be soon cooperating with', 'I am insecure about my chances of promotion', 'I am afraid I might soon have to work in a different location or in a different department' and 'I think my work will become less interesting in the future' (Brondino et al., 2020, p. 2). Omega reliability values of 0.78 and higher were previously recorded for this scale (Brondino et al., 2020).

Two subscales of the *Workplace Trust Survey* (Ferres & Travaglione, 2003) were also employed to measure trust among co-workers (12 items, e.g. 'I think that my co-workers act reliably from one moment to the next') and organisational trust (11 items, e.g. 'I have positive feelings about the future direction of my organisation'). Responses were offered on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Previous research conducted in South Africa reported reliability scores of above 0.9 (Kleynhans et al., 2021).

Research procedure

An invitation to participate detailing the intention of the study and clarifying procedures was advertised electronically. An independent service provider facilitated collection of written informed consent forms, granting access to the online survey, which was open for approximately 2 weeks. Anonymised survey results were forwarded to the researcher for analysis.

Statistical analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30, IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York, United States) and Mplus 8.11 (Version 8.11, Muthén & Muthén, Los Angeles, California, United States) (Muthén & Muthén, 2024) were used to analyse the data. Scale reliabilities were assessed with omega values and were considered acceptable if > 0.70 , good if between 0.80 and 0.89 and excellent if equal or higher than 0.9 (Revelle & Zinbarg, 2009). Latent variable modelling was done using weighted least square means and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation for categorical variables. Model fit was assessed with chi-square (testing for a perfect fit), the standardised root mean residual (SRMR), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI), where TLI and CFI > 0.90 was acceptable (> 0.95 was preferred) and RMSEA and SRMR < 0.08 indicated a close fit. The Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) were used for model comparisons (Wang & Wang, 2020). Indirect effects were tested with the PROCESS procedure proposed by Hayes (2018) via bootstrapping with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) (Hayes, 2018), reporting both upper and lower bounds.

Ethical considerations

The Research Ethics Committee of a reputable university in South Africa approved this study. Permission was also granted by the relevant authorities of the utility organisation.

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from North-West University, Economics Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref. no. NWU-00745-20-A4).

Results

Before commencement of more in-depth analysis, Harman's single-factor test for common method variance (CMV) (Tehseen et al., 2017) was done. This test indicated that only 35.7% of the variance could be explained by a single factor, which suggested that CMV was not evident (Tehseen et al., 2017) and that the dataset was suitable for further analyses.

Confirmatory factor analysis

Using Mplus, Version 8.11, three alternative models were tested to identify the model that suited the data best. Model 1 was configured closely to what the theory proposed. This involved two first-order latent variables: trust in the organisation (11 items) and trust in colleagues (12 items). In line with what Brondino et al. (2020) proposes, qualitative job insecurity was measured as a four-factor model – employment conditions, working conditions, work relationships and job characteristics – with two indicators per factor. Social health was constructed as a five-factor model, each measured by three items, in accordance with the measure developed by Keyes (1998).

This model was not positive definite. The problem concerned the work conditions subscale of the job insecurity measure, which caused an unstable factor structure. Consequently, an alternative model was constructed in which social health and the trust scales were retained exactly as before; job insecurity was, however, proposed as a single latent construct measured directly by eight items. The second model rendered a good fit with CFI and TLI values of 0.96 each, and the SRMR (0.06) was below 0.08.

A third alternative option where all constructs were measured only by directly observable indicators was also examined (Model 3). This model showed a reasonable fit but was inferior across all indicators used when compared to the previous model. Model 2 was, therefore, preferred, not only because it rendered a better fit and was the most parsimonious but also because this preferred model was closer to what the theory assumed. The statistical results of the models are recorded in Table 1.

All standardised regression coefficients of the preferred measurement model (Model 2) were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), and the items contributed to their respective

TABLE 1: Comparison of fit indices across the three candidate measurement models.

Competing models	Chi-square	df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1	Did not converge	-	-	-	-	-
2	2542.64*	978	0.96	0.96	0.06	0.06
3	3017.83*	983	0.94	0.95	0.07	0.06

df, degrees of freedom; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual.

*, $p < 0.01$.

constructs in line with expectations, with practical significant values ranging from 0.40 (lowest) to 0.93 (highest). Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the latent variables, including the corresponding reliability coefficients.

All the scales showed good reliability with values above 0.8 (Revelle & Zinbarg, 2009). All correlations among the constructs were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). The two forms of trust both recorded positive correlations with social well-being (large effect). Subjective job insecurity registered negative correlations of small effect with all other variables in the model.

Testing structural models

The best measurement model was used as the basis for testing the structural model using latent variable modelling. The results showed that the structural model provided a good fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 2542.64$, degrees of freedom (df) = 978, $p < 0.01$; RMSEA = 0.06 (90% CI: 0.06 to 0.07). Although the Chi-square test was statistically significant, the RMSEA was below the 0.08 threshold, and both the CFI and TLI values exceeded the 0.90 benchmark, indicating a good fit. In addition, the RMSEA and SRMR values were well within acceptable ranges. Figure 1 and Table 3 display the standardised coefficients for the structural model, as estimated using Mplus 8.11.

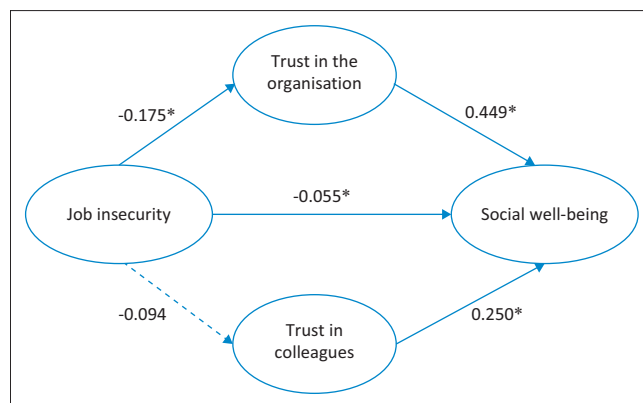
Table 3 shows that job insecurity had a significant negative effect on social well-being. Hypothesis 1 was accepted. Trust in the organisation and trust in co-workers had a statistically

TABLE 2: Means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities and associations among the scales.

Variable	Mean	SD	ω	1	2	3
Trust in the organisation	4.35	1.46	0.96	-	-	-
Trust in colleagues	4.86	1.37	0.97	0.62	-	-
Perceived job insecurity	4.20	1.26	0.83	-0.24	-0.14	-
Social well-being	3.79	1.23	0.93	0.65	0.57	-0.24

Note: All correlations were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Parameters for the correlation coefficients were considered as a small effect when $r \geq 0.10$, a medium effect when $r \geq 0.30$, and a large effect when $r \geq 0.50$ (Cohen, 1998).

SD, standard deviation.



*, $p < 0.05$.

FIGURE 1: Indirect effects between job insecurity and social well-being in the workplace.

TABLE 3: Standardised regression coefficients of the two forms of trust and job insecurity perceptions in relation to social health as dependent variable.

Variable	Estimate	SE	Est/SE	<i>p</i>
Social well-being as predicted by:				
Trust in the organisation	0.46	0.05	9.93	0.000**
Trust in colleagues	0.27	0.05	5.75	0.000**
Perceived job insecurity	-0.09	0.04	-2.18	0.029*

SE, standard error; Est., estimate.

*, $p < 0.05$; **, $p < 0.01$.

significant positive effect on social well-being. Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported. Table 3 depicts the structural model results.

Indirect effects 1

Many real-world problems probably operate through multiple mechanisms; it is, thus, better to estimate a model consistent with such realities. This research investigated how two types of trust serve as mediating factors in the negative association between perceived job insecurity and social well-being.

Perceived job insecurity negatively and statistically significantly influenced the social wellness of individuals in the work context indirectly via diminished levels of trust in the organisation ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < 0.05$ [-0.14, -0.03]). H3a was accepted. The mediated effect of job uncertainty, when considering trust in co-workers, also resulted in a negative effect on social well-being, but was not statistically significant at the 95% level ($\beta = -0.02$, $p > 0.05$ [-0.06, 0.01]). H3b was not accepted.

The data were consistent with the claim that job satisfaction negatively influenced social well-being in the work context directly as well as indirectly by diminishing trust in the organisation, which, in turn, lowered the social well-being of the employees. Figure 1 shows the standardised values of the parallel multiple mediator model via two indirect mechanisms: trust in the organisation (M1) and trust in colleagues (M2).

Discussion

This research uniquely examines the combined effects of job insecurity and two different trust levels on the social health of employees in a South African utility company.

Our findings confirmed that increased perceptions of job insecurity had a detrimental effect on an individual's social well-being within the workplace. This finding added to the literature that previously highlighted job insecurity as a significant predictor of poor mental and physical health (De Witte et al., 2016; Kim, 2019) and linked qualitative job insecurity to flourishing (Van Dam et al., 2020) by specifically demonstrating its negative effect on the social aspect of health. The results suggested that managers could enhance the social aspect of employee well-being by minimising factors that contributed to feelings of job insecurity and responsibly managing those factors that could not be removed.

In addition, the findings indicated that higher levels of trust – both in the organisation as an entity and horizontally in co-workers – were positively correlated with greater social well-being, with organisational trust having the most significant impact. The direct relationship between employee trust levels and their social well-being reinforced the idea that fostering trust at various levels within the organisation was beneficial for well-being.

Interestingly, only trust directed at the organisation had a significant indirect effect. The study revealed that job insecurity undermined social well-being by eroding trust in the organisational entity, which, in turn, decreased social well-being. As a result, managers can reduce the adverse impacts of job insecurity and improve social well-being by ensuring that the organisation is perceived as consistent and fair in its decisions and actions.

Overall, these findings are aligned with previous research done by Ashleigh et al. (2012), Czerw (2019), Marozva and Pelser (2025) and Tabor-Błażewicz (2023), who argued for a direct link between trust levels and subjective assessments of personal social health, as well as with Jaškevičiūtė et al. (2021) who demonstrated that organisational trust positively affected employee well-being. However, it is important to note that the mentioned studies did not operationalise trust and well-being in the same specific manner as this study, particularly regarding the exclusive focus on the social dimension of well-being.

The observation that the organisational entity as focus of trust played a more significant role in enhancing the social dimension of mental health compared to interpersonal trust among colleagues is noteworthy, especially considering the importance of interpersonal relationships in fulfilling social needs. While no directly comparable research was found, organisational trust has been identified as having great significance for health-related outcomes (Di Stefano et al., 2018; Kleyhans et al., 2021).

The finding that organisational trust, rather than trust among co-workers, served as a crucial mechanism linking job insecurity to social well-being underlines the vital role of institutional trust in mitigating the adverse effects of job insecurity. This supports existing research of Richter and Näswall (2019) and Salanova et al. (2021), which highlighted the role of organisational trust as a facilitative mechanism and broadens the scope of knowledge by identifying organisational trust as a key factor that mitigates the detrimental impact of job insecurity on the social well-being of individuals in the workplace. This may occur when employees feel their contributions are not adequately recognised by the organisation, such as in cases of perceived breaches of the implicit agreement between employer and employee or when they sense that the organisation ceased to act in their best interest, as evidenced by layoffs or reduced resources for their roles.

Implications

Social well-being in the workplace can be enhanced by purposefully addressing issues related to subjectively experienced job insecurity, by having focused strategies to advance a psychologically safe work environment and promote trust in the organisation and by fostering an inclusive, positive and productive workplace culture.

Specific strategies should include openly acknowledging the potentially devastating effect of job insecurity on employees and focusing on concerted efforts to mitigate its effects. Policies, practices and interventions that prioritise job stability and enhance resilience should be implemented. Examples include efforts to provide alternative career development and retraining opportunities, mentoring relationships, resilience workshops and social support interventions such as employee assistance programmes and channelling vulnerable employees to professional counselling services (Jaškevičiūtė et al., 2021). Such efforts show that individuals are valued, respected and cared for, which promotes trust in the organisation and, ultimately, promotes a sense of belonging and social connectedness (Kim, 2019; Mathibe & Chinyamurindi, 2021). Change management strategies should, furthermore, consider the dynamics of informal social networks and devise ways to support these, for they are instrumental in helping employees to cope with disruption.

Organisational trust and employee social well-being can be supported by advancing effective and transparent communication structures. This can be done by increasing the frequency of updates on company performance, goals and changes, and how these will affect the psychological contract with employees, for example, by communicating that flexibility and multiskilling rather than long years of service might increase changes of employee retention. More positive evaluations of the trustworthiness (integrity and kindness, in particular) of the organisation help to diminish the magnitude of perceived risk and instability (Jaškevičiūtė et al., 2021; Okello & Gilson, 2015). Accepting the updates as truthful facilitates insights into the dilemmas that the organisation is facing and the complex reasons for decisions taken; it also promotes understanding of how the work environment continues to function as an integrated and coherent whole (social coherence) and what opportunities remain for making a valuable social contribution to the organisation (Okello & Gilson, 2015; Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021).

The harmful effects of job insecurity on social well-being can be countered further by promoting participatory decision-making, which helps individuals to feel more in control of their immediate situation and decreases perceptions of job insecurity (De Witte et al., 2016). Inclusion in decision-making also reduces perceived inequality and enhances perceptions of fairness, which are key determinants of organisational trust (Chung et al., 2024; Jaškevičiūtė et al., 2021). Facilitating trust in the organisation through inclusive decision-making may enhance autonomous functioning and confidence to participate in actions that shape the future; in turn, this may support social well-being by

enhancing social integration, social coherence and social acceptance (Chung et al., 2024; Stankevičiūtė et al., 2021). In addition, human resource managers should monitor employee well-being through regular surveys and ensure that employees have opportunities for individual expression of voice and that there are appropriate structures that allow for collective representation (Guest, 2017).

Finally, organisational leaders can enhance social well-being by cultivating a positive psychological work climate through encouraging honesty, respect and inclusivity of members from culturally diverse backgrounds and different perspectives. In this way, trust is enhanced (Chung et al., 2024; Downey et al., 2015), and employees may feel more confident to share their concerns and offer mutual support, which, ultimately, promotes social acceptance, social integration and social coherence (Hennicks et al., 2024; Mathibe & Chinyamurindi, 2021).

Limitations

The data were obtained from self-reports, which was the most direct way to tap into participants' personal views, but could lead to either inflated or deflated-related associations that might have narrowed the findings of this study. Although concerted efforts were made to minimise potential consistency bias, this possibility could not be ruled out completely. This study also focused primarily on the direct and indirect effects of a limited number of precursors on social well-being. Future studies might include additional variables such as perceptions of justice and fairness. Lastly, the study was conducted only in the utility industry; future research might consider including other industries as well.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that job insecurity was negatively associated with the social well-being of individuals at work. While both organisational trust and trust in colleagues were found to have a positive relationship with social health, only high levels of institutional trust served as a potential indirect buffering factor in the link between job insecurity and employee social well-being.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

E.C.H. conducted this study as part of her PhD in Labour Relations Management at the North-West University and was responsible for data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing of the thesis. M.M.H. was the promotor and assisted with conceptualisation, data analysis, interpretation and article writing for publication purposes. S.R. was the co-promotor and responsible for conceptualisation, review and editing of the article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, M.M.H.

Disclaimer

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