



Too Scared to Fight Back? Affective Job Insecurity as a Boundary Condition Between Workplace Incivility and Negative Mood States in Temporary Agency Workers

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Abstract

Blue-collar temporary agency workers may confront daily workplace incivility, based on their status as outsiders in the user company, and affective job insecurity, based on their unstable employment situation. Building on the employment-health dilemma (Köbler, F. J., Wesche, J. S., & Hoppe, A. (2023). In a no-win situation: The employment–health dilemma. *Applied Psychology*, 72(1), 64–84) and the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. Oxford University Press), we examine how these factors jointly shape workers' daily affective experiences. We assume that workers with high levels of affective job insecurity feel less capable to fight back against workplace incivility. Consequently, we hypothesize that these workers are less likely to respond to daily workplace incivility with angry mood and more likely to respond with sad mood. To address our hypotheses, we conducted a daily diary study in Switzerland with 95 blue-collar temporary agency workers. As expected, affective job insecurity weakened the link between daily workplace incivility and angry mood, whereas it strengthened the link between daily workplace incivility and sad mood. In sum, our findings suggest that worries and fears related to keeping one's job can alter how workers respond to daily workplace incivility. We discuss our findings in the context of temporary agency work.

Keywords Temporary agency work · Workplace incivility · Affective job insecurity · Angry mood · Sad mood

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Introduction

Blue-collar temporary agency workers play a crucial role in the economies of many high-income countries. These workers, employed by temporary agencies, are assigned to different user companies for short periods. This arrangement helps user companies adjust to fluctuating demands for various products and services. Despite their economic contributions, blue-collar temporary agency workers tend to be seen as easily replaceable (De Cuyper et al., 2009; Kalleberg, 2000). As a consequence, they confront precarious working conditions, that entail both health and economic threats (Underhill & Quinlan, 2011).

The effects of health and economic threats cannot be understood in isolation (e.g., Allan et al., 2021; Bazzoli & Probst, 2023; Shoss et al., 2023). The employment-health dilemma (Köbller et al., 2023) provides a conceptual basis to understand the interplay between health and economic threats, explaining how it can perpetuate precariousness over time. The core premise of the framework is that workers operating under economic threats feel less capable of protecting themselves against acute health threats by fighting back. In line with this assumption, empirical research suggests that economic threats impact workers' behavioural responses to health threats. For instance, research has linked perceptions of economic threats to presenteeism (Shoss et al., 2023) and silence about safety concerns (Bazzoli & Probst, 2023). What has not been addressed, however, is whether the interplay between health and economic threats also has consequences for workers' affective experiences. Insight into this question is crucial since affective experiences may serve as proximal mechanisms that help explain why workers' behavioural responses to health threats vary depending on their exposure to economic threats.

We seek to fill this gap. In particular, we focus on workers' affective experiences in relation to the interplay between daily experienced workplace incivility, a health threat, and affective job insecurity, an emotional reaction to job loss as an economic threat. Following the employment-health dilemma (Köbller et al., 2023) and relevant empirical research (Shoss et al., 2023; Vander Elst et al., 2014), we argue that workers with high levels of affective job insecurity should feel powerless to fight back against workplace incivility. Drawing on the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991), we relate this assumption to differential predictions regarding angry and sad mood. Specifically, we assume that affective job insecurity weakens the link between workplace incivility and angry mood but strengthens the link between workplace incivility and sad mood. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a daily diary study with blue-collar temporary agency workers in Switzerland.

Our research makes two important contributions. First, we establish affective job insecurity as a critical lens to understand differences in workers' affective experiences in relation to workplace incivility. Research has demonstrated that workplace incivility is associated with various negative affective experiences, including sad and angry mood (Han et al., 2022; Schilpzand et al., 2016). What is not yet clear, however, is which conditions differentiate between affective experiences. Insight into this question is essential since different affective experiences can motivate different behavioural tendencies (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Indeed, research suggests that sad mood can motivate withdrawal in response to workplace incivility, whereas angry

mood can motivate approach-oriented behaviours (e.g., Porath & Pearson, 2012). Building on these findings, we highlight the role of affective job insecurity as a factor that may explain these differences.

Second, we contextualise the interplay between health and economic threats by focusing on the experiences of blue-collar temporary agency workers. Critical perspectives in work and organisational psychology have long highlighted an insufficient focus on the contextual factors that underlie psychological processes (Islam & Sanderson, 2022; Restubog et al., 2021). Although health and economic threats may shape the lives of all workers to some degree, they are not randomly distributed among the working population (Fujishiro et al., 2022). Instead, these threats cumulate and gain salience in precarious work arrangements (Köbler et al., 2023; Sinclair et al., 2024). Blue-collar temporary agency work thus provides a particularly useful research context to investigate the interplay between workplace incivility and affective job insecurity.

Workplace Incivility as a Health Threat

Workplace incivility entails “low intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). Although workplace incivility can appear innocuous from the outside, it fundamentally threatens the target’s need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hershcovis et al., 2017). Research has consistently linked workplace incivility to negative health outcomes, including detriments in psychological well-being, physical, and mental health (Han et al., 2022; Schilpzand et al., 2016).

Workplace incivility should be a salient issue in the context of temporary agency work. Indeed, research has shown that temporary agency workers are assigned lower social status within the work team (Wilkin et al., 2018), and are perceived by their permanent counterparts as outsiders and potential threats (Bosmans et al., 2015). These conditions should offer grounds for various forms of mistreatment. We focus on workplace incivility because it represents a form of modern interpersonal discrimination (Cortina, 2008). In fact, its subtle and ambiguous nature makes it easy for the instigator to deny interpersonal mistreatment. The link between workplace incivility and temporary agency work is substantiated by qualitative research, which has documented numerous experiences of workplace incivility in temporary agency workers (Cardone et al., 2021; Holm et al., 2016). These experiences range from exclusion, and denial of essential information, to rude comments, and other forms of subtle mistreatment. Taken together, we conceive of workplace incivility as an important health threat for temporary agency workers. This aligns with Köbler et al. (2023), who emphasised that health threats include not only physical but also psychosocial hazards.

Affective Job Insecurity as an Economic Threat

Affective job insecurity encompasses the worry, anxiety, or fear that one’s employment situation may become unstable (Sverke et al., 2002). We zoom in on the quantitative dimension of affective job insecurity to address fears about job loss as an

economic threat (Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Pienaar et al., 2013). Different factors impact the quantitative dimension of affective job insecurity, including the perceived likelihood of job loss, the subjective importance of the job, and the perceived inability to prevent job loss (Ashford et al., 1989; Lee et al., 2018).

Affective job insecurity should be a salient experience for temporary agency workers, particularly in blue-collar jobs. Their employment involves short-term contracts with limited protections against dismissal (De Cuyper et al., 2009; Kalleberg, 2000). Their status as blue-collar workers implies additional vulnerability. Indeed, blue-collar workers are typically seen as easy to replace by both automation (Snell & Gekara, 2023) and other workers (Autor et al., 2006). Temporary agencies and user companies should thus have little motivation to retain individual blue-collar temporary agency workers, particularly in high-income countries. Individual workers, however, rely strongly on job assignments to fulfil their financial needs (Allan et al., 2021). This disbalance in economic power means that temporary agency workers in blue-collar jobs are likely to confront fears about both the stability of their assignments with the user company and their contractual relationship with the temporary agency. A meta-analysis by Keim et al. (2014) offered support for this argument, highlighting that both temporary agency work and blue-collar work are associated with higher levels of job insecurity between workers. Taken together, we selected affective job insecurity to represent the economic side of the employment health dilemma framework (Köbler et al., 2023). This is because affective job insecurity effectively captures fears about job loss, a salient economic threat within the context of blue-collar temporary agency work.

Interplay between Workplace Incivility and Affective Job Insecurity

The employment-health dilemma framework (Köbler et al., 2023) suggests a complex interplay between health and economic threats. It assumes that the consequences of health threats can only be understood against workers' exposure to economic threats. While workers in a comfortable economic situation can change their circumstances to avoid health threats, workers who confront economic threats lack the means to do so. Forced to choose between employment and health, these workers tend to prioritise employment (see Shoss et al., 2023).

Crucially, Köbler et al. (2023) shed light on the psychological mechanisms that underlie this phenomenon. In particular, they suggest that workers operating under economic threats feel trapped and powerless to protect themselves against acute health threats. Research has offered support for this assumption, showing that job insecurity, in particular, evokes a sense of powerlessness in workers (Vander Elst et al., 2014). To extend these considerations and provide nuanced insight into the affective underpinnings of the employment-health dilemma, we turn to the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991).

Zooming in on the health side of the equation, the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) allows specific predictions on how psychosocial hazards, such as daily workplace incivility, impact workers' affective experiences. Because these hazards generally threaten the valued goals of the individual, they should induce negative affective experiences, including angry mood and sad mood. Sev-

eral daily diary studies found support for this assumption, showing a positive link between daily workplace incivility and end-of-day angry and sad mood (Adiyaman & Meier, 2022; Niven et al., 2022). We follow these theoretical considerations and prior empirical research, hypothesising:

H1 Daily workplace incivility is positively related to angry mood.

H2 Daily workplace incivility is positively related to sad mood.

Further, the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) links the perceived powerlessness evoked by economic threats to differential predictions regarding angry and sad mood. Lazarus (1991) specified that individuals should respond to an acute threat with anger, instead of sadness, if they believe that the “offense is best ameliorated by attack; in effect, the individual evaluates her coping potential of mounting an attack favorably” (p. 225). Notably, research has offered mixed support regarding this assumption. In particular, some findings suggest that perceived coping potential may be relevant for the expression but not for the experience anger (Harmon-Jones et al., 2003). However, other findings support the initial assumption by Lazarus (1991), showing that the experience of anger is accompanied by appraisals of personal control, confidence, and certainty (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006), whereas sadness is associated with hopelessness (Abramson et al., 1989) and lack of control (Levine, 1996).

Following these theoretical and empirical considerations, we position affective job insecurity as a boundary condition that drives the effects of daily workplace incivility on angry and sad mood in opposing directions. In essence, workers with high levels of affective job insecurity should feel unable to fight back against workplace incivility, weakening the link between daily workplace incivility and angry mood but strengthening the link between daily workplace incivility and sad mood. We hypothesise:

H3 The relationship between daily workplace incivility and angry mood is weaker (vs. stronger) in workers with high (vs. low) levels of affective job insecurity.

H4 The relationship between daily workplace incivility and sad mood is stronger (vs. weaker) in workers with high (vs. low) levels of affective job insecurity.

Method

Research Context

We collected data from blue-collar temporary agency workers in Switzerland between November 2021 and July 2023. Two aspects are noteworthy in this context. First, in the Swiss labour market, temporary agency work is tightly linked to migration. An analysis by swissstaffing (2023) of data from the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) revealed that 62% of temporary agency workers in Swit-

zerland in 2021 were migrants. A vast majority of these migrant workers come from other European countries (swissstaffing, 2023). Second, data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Switzerland had COVID-related regulatory measures in place until April 2022, these were mild and focused on specific domains of public life. To the best of our knowledge, they had no direct impact on our participants' work lives.

Procedure

The study received approval from the local ethics committee (reference number: 2021-714R1). We used two strategies to recruit participants. First, we leveraged the professional network of one author employed at a large temporary agency to reach workers placed in production plants. Second, we collaborated with a Swiss employers' association for temporary agencies to contact workers in the construction and manufacturing industries. To incentivise participation, we offered feedback on study results and the chance to win one of 16 vouchers (each worth 50 Swiss Francs).

The study comprised two parts: an initial online questionnaire and a series of five phone interviews. In the initial online questionnaire, participants declared their informed consent before providing basic demographic and work-related information. Next, we conducted phone calls in the participants' preferred language, documenting their responses to various psychometric measures. We chose this method to ensure that the study was accessible to our target population, primarily migrant blue-collar workers. Interviewers were carefully trained to maintain neutrality towards participants' responses, refraining from commenting or joining in on laughter initiated by a participant. Calls were carried out after participants' work shifts. Although we aimed to sample consecutive workdays, this was not always possible (e.g., when a participant was ill). In such cases, we skipped a day but continued calling until we collected data on five different days or until a participant dropped out of the study.

Data collection was part of a larger research project and therefore included additional measures that also impacted the length of the phone calls.¹ The duration of the calls varied, with the first call being the longest (approximately ten minutes), followed by the last call (approximately eight minutes). The calls on the days in between were shorter (approximately three to five minutes).

Sample

In total, $N=102$ temporary agency workers filled in the consent sheet. Because $N=7$ participants did not continue with the daily phone calls, our final sample consisted of $N=95$ workers on $N=445$ workdays. For our within-person analyses, which required

¹ All phone calls included questions about day-level variables. Relevant day-level variables are workplace incivility, angry mood, and sad mood. In addition, we asked about participants' sleep quality (which was not relevant to our research model). In the first call, we added measures, enquiring about more stable work- and employment-related stressors and resources. Only the measure of affective job insecurity is relevant to the research presented here. Additional measures included procedural justice. In the final call, we added measures, enquiring about more stable outcome variables (i.e., physical health and turnover intention). None of the more stable outcome measures are relevant to the research presented here.

person-mean centering, it was essential that each participant provided data on at least two separate days. We verified that all 95 participants in our final sample met this criterion.

Most of the phone calls were conducted in French ($n=51$), followed by Polish ($n=12$), Italian ($n=11$), German ($n=8$), Portuguese ($n=6$), English ($n=4$), and Spanish ($n=3$). Most of the sample consisted of migrant (non-Swiss) temporary agency workers (84.21%). This proportion matches representative data on the temporary agency worker population in Switzerland (swisstafing, 2023). Most of the workers in our sample were citizens from other European countries (67.37%); the majority held French citizenship (25.26%), followed by Polish (13.68%), Italian (11.58%), and German (3.16%) citizenship. A large majority of the participants were male (73.68%), consistent with representative demographic data by swisstafing (2023). On average, participants were 35.9 years old ($SD=10.7$).

Regarding educational background, 14.74% held a degree from a university or polytechnic school, 35.80% had completed an apprenticeship, 26.32% had completed secondary school, and 13.68% had completed compulsory school. All participants had a blue-collar job. The most commonly selected job titles were polyvalent operator (44.21%) and precision mechanic (11.57%), followed by mechanic (4.21%) and technician (3.16%). A large portion of the participants (36.84%) did not select any predefined job titles, and instead specified their jobs in an open follow-up item. These job titles include conditioning worker, forklift operator, machinist, metal fabricator, drywall installer, and bricklayer.

Measures

We translated the original English scales into French, Italian, German, Polish, Spanish and Portuguese following the translation and back-translation procedure outlined by Brislin (1970). The translations were exclusively conducted by native speakers in the target language. A full list of employed scales and translations is provided by Gahrmann and colleagues (2023).

Workplace Incivility

We assessed daily workplace incivility via an adapted version of the Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS; Cortina et al., 2001) published by Hershcovis et al. (2017) for daily diary studies. An example item was, “Today, people at work were rude to me.”. We added one additional item, “Today, people at work excluded me.”. We made this choice because research suggests that exclusion is a salient experience for temporary agency workers (Cardone et al., 2021; Holm et al., 2016). It also captures Cortina’s (2001) original item of being “excluded from professional camaraderie”. Notably, we used the phrase ‘people at work’ rather than ‘colleagues and supervisors’ to avoid potential confusion in the context of temporary agency work. Participants indicated their agreement with these items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 “not at all” to 5 “very much”).

Negative Mood States

We used six items from the Profile of Mood States (POMS; McNair et al., 1992) scale to assess angry mood and sad mood (following the selection by Cranford et al., 2006). Specifically, participants indicated the extent to which they felt “angry”, “resentful”, and “annoyed”, regarding angry mood, and “sad”, “hopeless”, and “discouraged”, regarding sad mood, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 “not at all” to 5 “very much”).

Affective Job Insecurity

We assessed affective job insecurity with the four-item subscale by Pienaar et al. (2013), instructing participants to consider their current job situation. An example item was, “I fear that I might lose my job.”. Participants indicated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 “disagree strongly” to 5 “agree strongly”).

Analytic Strategy

To test our hypotheses, we estimated multilevel random slope models with a cross-level interaction effect in the R package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015). Specifically, we regressed angry and sad mood on workplace incivility. By person-mean centring the predictor, workplace incivility, we removed stable between-person variance from fluctuations within persons. To examine our hypotheses on the role of affective job insecurity, we included the cross-level interaction of the person-mean-centred workplace incivility score and the grand-mean-centred affective job insecurity score. Furthermore, we modelled two sources of variance. First, we modelled the between-person effects of workplace incivility on angry and sad mood. Second, we estimated within-person measurement errors by applying a continuous-time model in the form of a first-order autoregressive residual structure (Box et al., 2016) to account for autocorrelations introduced by the temporal order of the daily measurement occasions. All estimates were obtained via restricted maximum likelihood estimation.

Preliminary Analyses

To test the distinctness of our study variables, we performed multilevel confirmatory factor analyses (MCFAs). First, we specified a three-factor model in which the items loaded on the hypothesised factors (workplace incivility, angry mood, sad mood). Results indicated a satisfactory model fit ($\chi^2 [64; N=445]=222.848, p<.001$; CFI=0.90; RMSEA=0.08; SRMI_{within} = 0.08; SRMI_{between} = 0.06). We compared this model to a two-factor model in which angry and sad mood were combined into one factor ($\chi^2 [68; N=445]=420.031, p<.001$; CFI=0.77; RMSEA=0.11; SRMI_{within} = 0.11; SRMI_{between} = 0.08) and a one-factor model in which all items were combined into one factor ($\chi^2 [70; N=334]=555.952, p<.001$; CFI=0.71; RMSEA=0.12; SRMI_{within} = 0.12; SRMI_{between} = 0.11). Overall, our results showed that the hypothesised four-factor model fitted the data better than the alternative models (two-factor model: $\Delta\chi^2[4]=197.18, p<.001$; one-factor model: $\Delta\chi^2[6]=293.10, p<.001$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all our study variables are summarised in Table 1. All measures showed good to excellent internal consistency. On average, participants reported low levels of workplace incivility, angry mood, and sad mood. In terms of experienced workplace incivility, participants were most likely to report that people at work were rude to them ($M=1.30$), followed by reports that they ignored them ($M=1.28$), excluded them ($M=1.18$), or put them down ($M=1.15$). Participants reported moderately high levels of affective job insecurity. ICCs revealed substantial within-person variability. An inspection of the correlations among our study variables indicates a positive link between workplace incivility and both angry and sad mood, with a notably stronger link between workplace incivility and angry mood. Likewise, there was a positive link between affective job insecurity and both angry and sad mood, with the link between workplace incivility and sad mood especially pronounced.

Inferential Statistics

Results from the multilevel regression analyses are displayed in Table 2. In line with H1 and H2, workplace incivility was positively related to angry mood and sad mood at the day level. In line with H3, affective job insecurity weakened the positive relationship between workplace incivility and angry mood. Simple slope tests clarified that the effect of workplace incivility on angry mood was weaker among workers who reported high levels of affective job insecurity ($b=0.10$, $p=.068$) compared to those who reported low levels of affective job insecurity ($b=0.35$, $p<.001$). In line with H4, affective job insecurity strengthened the relationship between workplace incivility and sad mood. Simple slope tests clarified that the effect of workplace incivility on sad mood was stronger among workers who reported high levels of affective job insecurity ($b=0.17$, $p<.001$) compared to those who reported low levels of affective job insecurity ($b=0.00$, $p=.956$). Information about our post-hoc power analysis can be found in the supplementary material.

Table 1 Means (M), standard deviations (SD), reliabilities and correlations between study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>ICC</i>	Ω^b	Ω^w	α	1	2	3	4
1. Workplace incivility	1.26	0.46	0.45	0.98	0.84	0.81	-	0.43	0.23	-
2. Angry mood	1.50	0.55	0.35	0.96	0.84	0.83	0.62	-	0.33	-
3. Sad mood	1.44	0.48	0.47	0.91	0.83	0.77	0.54	0.64	-	-
4. Affective job insecurity	2.83	1.14	-	-	-	0.81	0.13	0.10	0.29	-

Notes Ω^b McDonald's Omega between-person, Ω^w McDonald's Omega within-person, α averaged Cronbach's Alpha over measurement occasions. Between-person correlations are below the diagonal, within-person correlations are above the diagonal

Table 2 Multilevel analyses predicting sad mood and angry mood

	Dependent Variable: Sad Mood			Dependent Variable: Angry Mood		
	Null Model		Target Model	Null Model		Target Model
	Est. (SE)	<i>t</i>	Est. (SE)	Est. (SE)	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2
Intercept	1.40 (0.05)	26.41***	1.41 (0.04)	1.40 (0.05)	27.60***	1.45 (0.03)
<i>Within Person</i>						
Workplace Incivility	-	-	0.09 (0.03)	0.03	-	0.23 (0.05)
<i>Between Person</i>						
Workplace Incivility	-	-	0.30 (0.05)	0.21	-	0.39 (0.04)
Affective Job Insecurity	-	-	0.10 (0.04)	2.56*	-	0.00 (0.04)
<i>Cross-Level</i>						
Workplace Incivility \times Affective Job Insecurity	-	-	0.07 (0.02)	3.12**	-	-0.11 (0.03)
<i>Variance Components</i>						
Intercept Variance	0.21 (0.46)		0.13 (0.40)	0.18 (0.43)		0.11 (0.33)
Slope Variance	-		0.02 (0.12)	-		0.05 (0.22)
Residual Variance	0.46 (0.68)		0.30 (0.54)	1.29 (1.13)		0.57 (0.75)
<i>Model statistics</i>						
BIC	817.60		771.23	896.40		779.25
AIC	801.21		730.27	880.02		738.40
R^2	-		0.30	-		0.41
<i>df</i>	4		10	4		10

Notes Main effects of workplace incivility were set as random and the interaction term as fixed; ΔR^2 = change in R^2 compared to the full model when the individual variance component is removed; BIC=Bayesian information criterion; AIC=Akaike information criterion; *df*=degrees of freedom

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

Discussion

Our research offers insight into the interplay between daily workplace incivility and affective job insecurity among blue-collar temporary agency workers. Leveraging the employment-health dilemma framework (Köbller et al., 2023) and the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991), we positioned affective job insecurity as a boundary condition that should weaken the link between daily workplace incivility and angry mood but strengthen the link between daily workplace incivility and sad mood.

Main Effects

In line with prior research (Adiyaman & Meier, 2022; Niven et al., 2022), we found a positive within-person effect of daily workplace incivility on angry and sad mood. Our results suggest that on days when temporary agency workers experience higher levels of workplace incivility, they report higher levels of angry and sad mood. Although not hypothesised, we found evidence for the same pattern at the between-person level.

Our study extends the current understanding of workplace incivility by focusing on the experiences of temporary agency workers, a population largely overlooked in previous research on workplace incivility (for notable exceptions, see Cardone et al., 2021, Holm et al., 2016). Considering the experiences of temporary agency workers is important since research on selective incivility suggests that workplace incivility disproportionately affects those who are marginalized (Cortina et al., 2013). This should apply to temporary agency workers, who are frequently stigmatized as outsiders in the user company (Cardone et al., 2021). Notably, migrant workers, who constitute a significant portion of the blue-collar temporary agency workforce in many high-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2021), should be particularly vulnerable to confront workplace incivility (Hoppe, 2011; Krings et al., 2014).

Considering the experiences of temporary agency workers is also important because insights derived from permanent workers may not necessarily apply to temporary agency workers, whose expectation for social relationships in the workplace may differ (Chambel et al., 2016; De Cuyper et al., 2009). Our study addressed this gap, showing that even day-to-day experiences of workplace incivility, a social stressor characterized by low intensity and high ambiguity (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), can substantially impair the affective well-being of temporary agency workers. As such, our findings indicate that despite the transient nature of their workplace relationships, temporary agency workers suffer adverse effects of workplace incivility. This can be reconciled with the notion that temporary agency workers have lower access to personal or social resources in the user company (Gundert & Hohendanner, 2014; Wilkin et al., 2018). Taken together, our findings underscore the need to recognize daily workplace incivility as an important health threat in the context of temporary agency work.

Moderation Effects

We found that affective job insecurity, an economic threat, impacts workers' affective responses to daily workplace incivility, an acute health threat. While daily workplace incivility was generally related to higher levels of daily angry and sad mood among workers, the strength of these relationships differed depending on workers' level of affective job insecurity. Specifically, we found that the relationship between daily workplace incivility and angry mood was weaker in workers with higher (vs. lower) levels of affective job insecurity. Conversely, we found that the relationship between daily workplace incivility and sad mood was stronger in workers with higher (vs. lower) levels of affective job insecurity.

This differential affective response pattern aligns with the argument by Lazarus (1991) that individuals who feel powerless of “mounting an attack” (p. 225) against a given threat should be less likely to experience anger and more likely to experience sadness. Our finding is crucial since it contributes to an ongoing scholarly debate over whether perceived powerlessness influences the experience rather than the expression of anger (Berkowitz & Harmon-Jones, 2004). Prior research has offered mixed findings regarding this question (Harmon-Jones et al., 2003). To further elucidate our finding in support of Lazarus (1991), we recommend that future research specifically investigates perceived coping potential in the appraisal process. Additionally, researchers may consider using physiological measures of arousal alongside self-reported anger to ensure accurate measurement of experienced, rather than expressed, anger. Independent of future research endeavours, our finding provides support for core assumptions of the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991) and the employment-health dilemma framework (Köbler et al., 2023).

Our finding also carries important practical implications. Notably, it gains relevance in light of research identifying angry and sad mood as mechanisms that link workplace incivility to different behavioural responses. In particular, research has indicated that anger mediates the link between workplace incivility and retaliatory actions, whereas sadness mediates the link between workplace incivility and withdrawal (Porath & Pearson, 2012). Drawing on this research, our findings suggest an affective response pattern that could make conflict escalation less likely (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Arguably, this should be functional for workers confronted with the looming threat of job loss. Indeed, getting angry and expressing that anger may expose these workers to severe repercussions, further destabilizing their employment situation (Callister et al., 2017). Conversely, experiencing sadness and withdrawing from the situation may effectively protect workers from incurring negative consequences in terms of their employment situation.

These potential benefits regarding employment stability may, however, come at a cost. Although anger is typically viewed as negative, it also serves as an important catalyst for self-protection and constructive efforts to remove the root causes of a given threat (Hess, 2014), as indicated by the positive link between anger and employee voice established in previous research (Kirrane et al., 2017; Madrid et al., 2015). Our results suggest that workers with high levels of affective job insecurity are less likely to experience angry mood in relation to daily workplace incivility, potentially reducing their motivation to enact behaviours that would effectively remove this

acute health threat. Additionally, our findings indicate that workers with high levels of affective job insecurity are more likely to experience sad mood in relation to daily workplace incivility. This is concerning because sad mood can be very detrimental for the individual, potentially resulting in hopelessness and depression (Leventhal, 2008; Ribeiro et al., 2018). Sad mood is also a particularly enduring affective state (Verduyn & Lavrijsen, 2015), suggesting that workers who respond to workplace incivility with sad mood may suffer longer. Taken together, our findings align with prior research, which has demonstrated that workers confronted with health and economic threats confront a dilemma, which they tend to solve by prioritizing employment over their own health and well-being (e.g., Bazzoli & Probst, 2023; Shoss et al., 2023). In particular, our results add nuanced insight into the affective underpinnings of this dilemma (Kößler et al., 2023).

Strengths and Limitations

Our study offers unique insights into the daily experiences of blue-collar temporary agency workers, a vulnerable population that has remained largely hidden from research in work and organizational psychology (Restubog et al., 2023). Indeed, research in this field tends to primarily rely on data from workers in privileged conditions (e.g., POSH samples, WEIRD samples; Gloss et al., 2017; Sinclair et al., 2024). This trend has repeatedly been criticized by researchers who call for studies that include workers “with less than optimal level[s] of choice” (Blustein, 2013, p. 5). Our study effectively addressed this call, targeting a sample of blue-collar temporary agency workers in Switzerland.

In light of this objective, our study procedure reflects a particular strength of our work. In particular, we opted for a study procedure that enabled participation in seven languages and was carried out via daily phone calls. We deemed these steps necessary to ensure that the study was accessible to our target population. A comparison of our data with representative data from temporary agency workers in Switzerland (swissstaffing, 2023) suggests that our approach was successful. In particular, we adequately captured the high percentage of migrant workers in the target population. Furthermore, the low missingness in daily responses suggests that our approach also allowed us to build trust with participants, a critical aspect when conducting research with vulnerable populations (Restubog et al., 2023).

Despite its strengths, our methodological approach also comes with limitations. In fact, our analysis did not account for the impact of item language and cultural background on response patterns. By pooling data across participants, we implicitly assumed that the items captured the same underlying constructs consistently. To test this measurement assumption, invariance analyses would be required. Due to the small sample size, this was not feasible (Meade & Bauer, 2007). We acknowledge the potential lack of measurement invariance as a critical limitation of our research. However, this issue is challenging to overcome, given the cultural and linguistic diversity among blue-collar temporary agency workers.

Next, given that our data collection was restricted to blue-collar temporary agency workers, our findings may not be generalizable to other populations. Two aspects warrant consideration. First, blue-collar temporary agency workers have low levels

of economic leverage. Indeed, this type of employment, characterized by low pay, minimal protection against dismissal, and high demands for flexibility, is unlikely to attract workers with other employment options (International Labour Organization, 2021). Instead, it should be vulnerable workers who drift into this employment arrangement, as evidenced by the high percentage of migrant workers in the blue-collar temporary agency workforce in Switzerland (swissstaffing, 2023). Given these considerations about selectivity in our target population, the question arises: How does the interplay between affective job insecurity and workplace incivility manifest among workers with higher levels of economic leverage? Following the employment-health dilemma framework (Köbler et al., 2023), we assume that workers with higher levels of economic leverage should be more likely to view health and economic threats as avoidable (i.e., by pursuing a different job). Consequently, we speculate that the direct effects of workplace incivility (and affective job insecurity) on angry mood should be stronger in workers with higher levels of economic leverage. Moreover, we speculate that affective job insecurity may be less likely to restrict workers' angry mood in response to workplace incivility if it is not compounded by the fact that other attractive job options are unavailable. Second, our target population skews male (swissstaffing, 2023), a trend also reflected in our data. Research suggests that men and women differ in their affective processing (Brody & Hall, 2008). In particular, research indicates that anger is regarded as acceptable in men but not in women (e.g., Hess et al., 2005). Taken together, it remains unclear whether our findings could be replicated in populations with higher levels of economic leverage and in more female segments of the workforce.

Lastly, our exclusive reliance on self-report data introduces potential methodological concerns, particularly regarding social desirability bias. This may explain why participants reported relatively low levels of workplace incivility despite their status as outsiders in the user company. Arguably, concerns about social-desirability bias are especially relevant since we conducted the study in Switzerland, where social cohesion is highly valued, and reports of workplace incivility may be discouraged (Dragolov et al., 2016). Nevertheless, we should note that floor effects regarding experienced workplace incivility are rather typical (e.g. Adiyaman & Meier, 2022). In any case, the potential impact of social desirability bias raises important concerns about range restriction, which may have led us to underestimate the effects of workplace incivility. It is not entirely clear, however, how these concerns may be addressed, given that workplace incivility is an inherently subjective experience.

Future Research

Our findings open up several avenues for future research. In particular, we advocate for research to clarify the antecedents of affective job insecurity and workplace incivility among blue-collar temporary agency workers. Identifying the antecedents of workplace incivility would add insight into its role as a form of modern interpersonal discrimination (Cortina, 2008). Given the overrepresentation of migrant workers in the temporary agency workforce (International Labour Organization, 2021; swissstaffing, 2023), we encourage future research to adopt an intersectional perspective, comparing self-reports of workplace incivility across work arrangements and

national backgrounds. Furthermore, understanding the antecedents of affective job insecurity may help identify which temporary agency workers are most vulnerable to job loss as an economic threat. Although temporary agency work inherently implies a high risk of job loss, the exposure to this economic threat varies between workers. Future research may apply a more nuanced perspective to identify antecedents of affective job insecurity, such as employment alternatives (Vahle-Hinz, 2016) and educational qualifications (De Cuyper et al., 2009).

Next, we encourage future research to investigate how affective job insecurity influences not only the relationship between workplace incivility and affective states but also subsequent behavioural outcomes. Addressing this question requires researchers to adopt a nuanced approach, paying attention to several conceptual complexities. First, the translation of affective states into behavioural outcomes should depend on various personal and environmental boundary conditions, necessitating a contingency perspective. This is also acknowledged by Lazarus (1991), who highlighted that while affective states entail an action tendency, this tendency “is often inhibited for personal and social reasons” (p. 226). Second, workplace incivility can trigger different affective responses, each with distinct implications for behavioural outcomes. We encourage researchers to consider which behavioural outcomes can be expected if a mixture of affective responses is triggered. Notably, investigating this question may require researchers to broaden the scope of examined affective responses beyond angry mood and sad mood. Embracing these conceptual complexities may be fruitful since insight into behavioural outcomes is necessary to understand whether workers who operate under high levels of affective job insecurity are, in fact, less likely to fight back against workplace incivility.

Lastly, researchers may adopt longitudinal designs to explain why affective job insecurity shapes workers’ angry and sad mood in response to daily workplace incivility. We based our research on the assumption that workers with high levels of affective job insecurity confront a no-win situation in which they feel unable to protect themselves against workplace incivility (Kößler et al., 2023). What is not clear, however, is how this dilemma unfolds over time. For instance, it is possible that workers, even those facing high levels of affective job insecurity, do initially experience and express anger when they become targeted by workplace incivility. Over time, however, they may realise that such responses come at the risk of losing their employment. This realisation should be particularly formative for workers with high levels of affective job insecurity. Taken together, the moderating effect of affective job insecurity may thus become stronger over time, lending itself to a longitudinal perspective.

Practical Implications

Based on our findings, we encourage decision-makers to install measures that prevent workplace incivility and affective job insecurity in blue-collar temporary agency workers. To prevent workplace incivility against temporary agency workers, we urge decision-makers to reduce the salience of intergroup differences between temporary and permanent workers. This may be achieved at different levels: symbolically, by ensuring equal dress codes and access to facilities; regarding task design, by avoid-

ing disadvantages for temporary agency workers in terms of assignments; regarding employment benefits, by striving for equal rights to holidays, sick leave, and bonuses (Cardone et al., 2021; Viitala & Kantola, 2016). These measures also align with policies on equal treatment (e.g., European Union, Directive 2008/104). Crucially, the successful implementation of these measures requires governments, temporary agencies, and user companies to continuously monitor their adherence to and enforce rewards and sanctions. Additionally, we propose team-sensitive onboarding initiatives to enhance relations between temporary and permanent workers. These should allow temporary workers to introduce themselves and ask questions, while also providing an opportunity for leadership to explain the role and value of the temporary worker to permanent staff (Wilkin et al., 2018).

To prevent affective job insecurity among temporary agency workers, we propose measures at multiple levels. In particular, governments should strengthen protections against dismissal, facilitate access to unemployment benefits, and enforce existing legislation. Moreover, temporary agencies can offer workers security by investing in training programs that workers can complete during paid work hours. In Switzerland, social partners reached a collective bargaining agreement under which temporary agency workers are entitled to a variety of job-oriented training programs (Lampart & Bühler, 2019). These programs enhance workers' employability, providing a resource against job insecurity (De Cuyper et al., 2009).

Recognizing that affective job insecurity and workplace incivility are pervasive problems within the context of blue-collar temporary agency work, we also encourage immediate efforts to support workers. Specifically, we recommend that user companies and temporary agencies implement formal voice mechanisms that allow temporary agency workers to anonymously and safely raise concerns about workplace incivility and other issues (Budd et al., 2010). These mechanisms should help identify and address problems before they escalate, safeguarding the health and well-being of temporary agency workers.

Conclusion

Our research shed light on the interplay between health and economic threats in the context of blue-collar temporary agency work. Our findings indicate that blue-collar temporary agency workers burdened by high levels of affective job insecurity are less likely to respond to workplace incivility with angry mood and more likely to respond with sad mood. These findings offer a first step toward understanding the role of specific affective experiences in the interplay between health and economic threats.

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Author contributions Caroline Gahrman and Petra L. Klumb contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation was performed by Caroline Gahrman, Petra L. Klumb, and Maryna Mytrofanova. Data collection was performed by Caroline Gahrman and Maryna Mytrofanova. Data analysis was performed by Caroline Gahrman. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Caroline Gahrman. Franziska Köbler and Petra L. Klumb commented and reviewed previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability The data and material that support the findings of this paper are openly available in SWISSUbase at <https://doi.org/10.48573/hjqz-js95>, reference number 2401. The R code is available on request

Declarations

Ethical approval The work was authorized by the ethics committee of the University of Fribourg (reference number: IRB-FR 2021-714R1).

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication The consent to publish has been received from all participants.

Competing interests Caroline Gahrman, Franziska Köbler, and Petra Klumb declare that they have no financial interest that are directly or indirectly related to the work. Maryna Mytrofanova is employed by a temporary agency in Switzerland.

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