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Understanding and Exploring the Concept of Fear, in the Work Context and Its Role in Improving Safety Performance and Reducing Well-Being in a Steady Job Insecurity Period

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Abstract: Job insecurity is attributable to the fear of being exploited by the organization and may have negative effects on employees. For example, it may lead employees to adopt non-compliant or deviant behaviors that harm individuals and their organization. However, knowledge about specific fears that have positive or negative effects on employees and organizations is limited. Therefore, this study aimed to detect the main fears related to job insecurity in an organization and the hidden meanings included in each of these fears that may cause negative and positive effects on important work-related outcomes. Further, we identified safety behaviors related to the previously identified fears. Notably, we investigated whether fears reduce well-being, the number of accidents and near misses, and behaviors related to safety and whether they increase the perceived probability of making mistakes. We conducted 65 focus groups with 37 managers/employees and 180 workers in separate groups. Furthermore, they completed a self-report questionnaire. We identified eleven fears and related meanings and ten safety behaviors. Multivariate regression analyses revealed that fears were significantly negatively associated with well-being and safety behaviors but not with the probability of making mistakes and causing accidents. Thus, fears play a key role in promoting behaviors, organizational strategies, and employees' well-being. The analysis results show that fears are included in a main general factor and suggest a new way to consider fears at work. Given our findings, we propose a new definition of fear in the organization.

Keywords: concept of fears; economic crisis; job insecurity; well-being; safety at work; safety behaviors



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1. Introduction

During an economic crisis, stronger, increased competition among enterprises to stay in the market drives the forces of organizational growth [1] but may reduce the attention paid to employee well-being. Specifically, organizations suffer the cyclical dynamics of a global crisis [2], and employees may fear being exploited by the organization [3]. This complex global scenario and disorientation can affect employees' understanding of the appropriate behaviors they should adopt [4]. In literature, this fear of being exploited by organization has been defined as 'job insecurity' or even 'the threat of unemployment', which is a potent stressor related to the possibility of job loss [5–7]. Indeed, job insecurity during a global crisis may be considered a context variable, and it causes numerous employees to feel insecure. We propose that job insecurity may be associated with different collective fears in the work context due to employees' potential job loss. For example, Jordan, Ashkanasy, and Härtel [8] have shown that downsizing lead to fear. However, to our knowledge, no

study has investigated the specific fears in a crisis period characterized by job insecurity or their effects on psychosocial organizational variables.

To date, researchers have considered various aspects of job insecurity related to work risk factors, such as well-being [5,9–12] and non-compliant or deviant behaviors [13]. Further, studies have found a negative relationship between job insecurity and performance [6,14]. Nevertheless, the effect of specific fears of unemployment (in a period of steady job insecurity) on collective emotions developed and shared in work groups, which could lead to negative consequences for organizational development, is yet to receive sufficient attention [15]. Just recently, [16] have explored what make employees fearful in the workplace. They have found that the main fears of employees are concerns over the opinion of their direct supervisor and the fear of being fired. Moreover, for an exception regarding this study and studies that have examined emotional work outcomes [17–20], the role of specific and collective fears in influencing work-related outcomes has received relatively limited attention and thus needs in-depth investigation. Specifically, fears are fundamental emotions and may result in a group of related reactions, ranging from anxiety to terror [21].

Given the limited research on this topic, we fill this gap in the literature by attempting to identify the main fears of employees in the organizational context during an economic crisis in a period of full-blown job insecurity and the effects of those emotions on some work-related positive and negative outcomes alternating and combining qualitative and quantitative methods. In particular, we address the possibility that fears have negative effects on well-being, safety at work in terms of the number of accidents (i.e., an unfortunate incident resulting in damage or injury), near misses (i.e., an unplanned event that does not result in injury or damage), and behaviors related to safety at work but, conversely, a positive effect on the perceived probability of making mistakes (i.e., an act of the individuals that is wrong and caused damage).

Understanding fears and their role in the work context may help managers and employees define strategies for facing such fears and to identify ways to reduce some negative, counterproductive effects and deviant behaviors in the organization [22,23]. More specifically, we investigate the negative and positive effects of a general factor of fear on performance through relevant subjective antecedents of behaviors (i.e., such as employees level of well-being and their perceived probability of making mistakes at work) and objective antecedents (i.e., work-related performance that does not require subjective interpretation), such as the number of accidents at work and the safety behaviors of employees. As regards well-being, it is considered a significant variable that is related to fears and performance. Notably, well-being is related to people's ability to work; it maintains positive relationships, increases positive emotions [24–26], and is considered the best predictor of work performance and satisfaction at work [27]. In this study, we use the affect-as-information theory as the main conceptual framework [28,29] but also show the role of the job demands–resources model [30,31], the Lazarus appraisal model of emotions theory [32], and their most important element to support the hypotheses of this study. The affect-as-information theory suggests that internal feelings (positive or negative) are forms of evaluation and provide information about our reactions to others as well as decision alternatives related to behaviors.

In the following sections, first, we explain the general theoretical framework of this study and the effect of the economic crisis on job insecurity. We describe the construct of job insecurity and its relationship with emotions and related behaviors. Next, we examine the concept of fear and the related effects on psychosocial variables. Subsequently, we underline the information role of emotion in the affect-as-information theory and present the hypotheses of the present research. Then, we present the study aims, methods, and results sections. Lastly, we discuss the results and present future research directions.

1.1. Economic Crisis, Job Insecurity, and Emotions in the Organization: Negative and Positive Effects

The chronic effect of an economic crisis (that herein is considered a steady context variable) is a relevant research issue since such crises have significant effects on job insecurity and on emotions in the organization. Job insecurity refers to the perception of employed people that they are threatened by unemployment, and it is considered a psychosocial risk related to future work [33]. It has been defined as the ‘perception of a potential threat to the continuity of the current job’ [6] (p. 243). Job insecurity is a sense of powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation [34]. Employees who are insecure about their continued employment display lower levels of performance, commitment, well-being, and trust in the organization [20,35–38]. Job insecurity is also negatively associated with optimism about the future [39]. Further, it has many negative effects that have been linked to several adverse health outcomes related to emotions, such as burnout [40,41], anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and depression [42]. Petitta and Jiang [43] state that mediation role of job insecurity between emotional contagion and burnout. A recent review of Shoss [20] summarizes the most important outcomes such as poor personal and work-related well-being, attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction and commitment), poor interpersonal and behaviors and outcomes (e.g., diminished coworkers support), workplace behaviors (e.g., safety and performance), and extraorganizational behaviors (e.g., job search and pursuit of interpersonal opportunity).

In considering the present economic scenario, which is marked by uncertainty and resource scarcity, much attention has certainly been paid to factors related to objective outcomes, such as economic and financial outcomes (e.g., job loss) and performance; however, employees’ emotions and the related fears that they share with their co-workers merit increased consideration [44]. In the following section, we present a theoretical framework of emotions. We consider that fears could play a key role in reducing well-being and accidents at work, as well as in, paradoxically, reducing actions related to safety at work.

Emotions in Organizations: From Individual’s Response to Collective’s Response

Emotions are complex psychological events and may be considered an individual’s response to an environmental stimulus, resulting in physical (e.g., facial and bodily expressions; behaviors) and psychological (e.g., cognition and subjective experiences) changes that call for action [45,46]. Emotions are relevant in organizational contexts as possible strategies [47], as an action disposition to adapt behaviors to face environmental conditions [28], as well as an internal subjective experience related to feelings, thoughts [48,49], and behaviors [50]. Every organization is an emotional place because its functioning depends on human beings and the relationships between human beings. Organizations are places of relationships and therefore necessarily elicit complex systems studded with emotions [51]. Examples of emotions include anger, fear, happiness, and sadness. Notably, emotions are influenced by the social context (e.g., work) in which people act [17,52–55] and thus may be differently perceived by different employees. In other words, emotions are truly complex phenomena and, given the difficulty in controlling them, have not been assigned appropriate relevance in the economic and organizational literature [56–58]. Organizations have been mainly guided by the need to produce and to rationalize procedure and behaviors and have often considered that paying attention to employee emotions would conflict with achieving organizational aims [17,59]. However, employees’ emotions have implications for team processes and performance [60,61]. To improve organizational performance, organizations often force employees to display emotions in conformance with a default standard that often differs from their real feelings. Hochschild [62] termed this process ‘emotional labour’ and stated that it is ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display, calling attention to how people manage’ (p. 7). Employees manage their feelings to respond to display rules through two acting strategies: ‘deep acting’ and ‘surface acting’. Through deep acting, employees deceive

themselves by changing their feelings, thus conforming their internal affection for the organization, and aligning their feelings with organizational expectations. By contrast, through surface acting, they do not modify their internal state in responding to work context needs but only modify the external display to conform with those needs. Thus, employees' use of the surface acting strategy produces an emotional dissonance that, in turn, is related to negative effects [63] such as emotional exhaustion (e.g., anger and depression) [64], ill-health, and reduced well-being [65,66]. Employees cannot act with a full sense of choice because of the display rules and thus have limited self-expression, which they do not find authentic. In contrast, deep acting leads to the alignment of internal emotions (i.e., it produces genuine emotions) with the external display and thus supports individuals in authentic self-expression, which consequently increases their well-being and role satisfaction [67,68]. However, organizational efforts to control employees' emotions, particularly in an uncertain context, could result in their adopting unanticipated behaviors [22,23] and, as aforementioned, this missed alignment between organizational norms and employee emotions may have negative effects for the organization as well. In other words, the organization conveys to employees what they must feel and informs them about the 'right' behaviors they should adopt, instead of paying attention to their needs, thus defining an 'emotional culture' of shared emotions and norms through employees' interactions and opinions [69].

However, in an uncertain, complex global economic context, wherein employees' needs are not satisfied and wherein individuals receive different and conflicting information, ineffective communication may be associated with negative emotions, such as fears and worry (e.g., regarding job loss), and with noncompliant behaviors (e.g., unsafe actions) that do not match organizational and emotional norms [70].

Employees' emotional experience may converge into an affective climate that sets norms and identifies the appropriate emotions that must be displayed, which influences employee performance and related behaviors [71].

1.2. Emotions and Fears in Organization: Research Hypotheses

1.2.1. Fear and Well-Being in Organizations

Fear is a basic emotion characterized by different reactions, such as anxiety, apprehension, fright, panic, and terror [21]. Studies on fear have been conducted in different organizational contexts and on different types of people and professions, ranging from children at play [72] to military activities [73,74]. A common aspect when we deal with fear is a distinctive feature, unlike for other emotions—the perception of a threat in a specific context [75]. For instance, fear in an uncertain circumstance may activate flight, fight, or freeze behaviors [76,77] in some contexts but not in others. The fear response and the resulting behaviors affects human well-being in terms of psychological and physical health [27,78]. In organizations, fear is described from one side as a generalized apprehension [79] and from another other side as a concern about the negative consequences of an individual's actions in the work context [80]. Generally, fear emerges when human needs are threatened and depends on how people appraise it.

In an economic global crisis, individuals or groups cannot directly act on negative circumstance to change the work context and are therefore forced to passively accept it to reduce the stress it produces [4,81]. When the negative circumstance is considered a threat, it triggers negative consequences. For example, employees are not able to achieve their goals (e.g., keep their job) and perceive less well-being [82]. Specifically, in this study, "subjective well-being" (SWB) refers to the frequent experience of positive affect, the infrequent experience of negative affect, and positive cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction [83] and work performance [84]. Applied research has found that employees' well-being is significantly related to a number of important work outcomes [85], such as job performance, employee retention, workplace accidents, absenteeism, and customer engagement. In particular, fears negatively influence well-being [86,87] and may have adverse effects on thoughts and behaviors [85]. Specifically, according to the job demands–

resources model [30,31], because of the lack of control due to the uncertain circumstances, individuals are not sure to have resources (i.e., aspects of the job functional in achieving work goals) to meet job demands (i.e., aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort) and to achieve their goals and organizational objectives. An unbalance between demands and resources may lead to negative outcomes such as stress. On the basis of the Lazarus appraisal model of emotions theory [32], in negative circumstances, individuals seek to protect themselves and, in a first step, evaluate/appraise if the threat is relevant or not (primary appraisal) and, in a second step, their capacity and resources to manage it (secondary appraisal). Individual's willingness to engage in managing a threat depends on its severity, one's sense of vulnerability, and one's belief that one can enact a response that will successfully reduce the threat. The fear, in a period of job insecurity, increases avoidance, self-protective response (automatic and defensive response), and the narrowing engagement and alternatives behaviors to meet the threat [86]. Overall, the individual's appraisal of the threat leads to a defensive reaction that may influence their state of well-being and beliefs to be able to reduce the threat [87].

In this study, considering the studies that have examined the relationship between emotions and well-being, we incorporate a theoretical framework to conduct an in-depth investigation on the role played by specific fears in reducing well-being. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Fears are negatively associated with well-being.*

1.2.2. Fears, Risk, Accidents, and Information in Organizations: The Role of Affect-As-Information Theory

In an uncertain context, perceived information plays a leading role in managing emotions and related behaviors [50,88–91]. The affect-as-information theory elucidates the informational function of emotions [28,92–94]. According to this theory, people's feelings are influenced by perceived information, which orients their judgement of events, but conversely, their emotions are influenced by subjective information [92,94], which orients their behaviors. Affective reaction provides information to us on what is good or bad and which are the right reactions to events. However, perceived information may call back a negative emotion (e.g., fear) previously experienced and may produce a defensive response [86]. For example, emotional states can influence risk perceptions; for instance, individuals who feel negative emotions such as fear consider it more likely that a negative event will occur [95]. Conversely, when facing an uncertain condition in a positive emotional state, people are more willing to take risks [18,47,96–98]. On the basis of this discussion, we propose that, in an uncertain work context, fears enhance the perceived probability of a negative event (i.e., of making mistakes), which leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *Fears are associated with a negative event (overestimated) and are thus positively associated with a perceived higher probability of making mistakes.*

Furthermore, fears, by enhancing the perception that a mistake (i.e., an act of the individuals that is wrong and caused damage) can occur should reduce the number of accidents (i.e., an unfortunate incident resulting in damage or injury) and near-misses (i.e., an unplanned event that does not result in injury or damage) in the workplace. On this point, it is also relevant to note that employees who experience fear conditions obviously seek to protect themselves from likely dangers. They could use two forms of self-protection or defensive mechanisms [99]: ego support and social support. The ego support form is an adaptive strategy used to protect the self that consists of a withdrawal response. The social support form is a request on social intervention that does not make employees feel alone.

Hence, fears in a steady crisis period should be negatively associated with the number of accidents and near misses (aggregated in a specific variable termed 'accidents'). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. *Fears are negatively associated with the numbers of 'accidents'.*

1.2.3. Fears, Performance, and Behaviors Related to Safety at Work

The literature has stressed that fear is associated with a negative emotional state through negative perceptions of information, which, in turn, has negative effects on well-being and positive effects on risk perception. For instance, a recent review of Bedoya and Solarte [100] have shown which are the most important negative effects that have been linked to a high level of fear in an organization, such as being afraid to admit mistakes, loss of creativity, lack of cooperation, low commitment, resistance to organizational change, slowing down decision-making, and low satisfaction and performance. However, some studies have also shown that fear has positive effects on performance. For instance, Lebel [101] considered proactivity influenced by fear and the related effects on functional outcomes for individuals and organizations, whereas Scott and Cervone [102] showed that a negative emotional state relates to higher performance. Employees in a negative emotional state and in uncertain conditions (i.e., when they perceive the possibility of job loss) could feel it necessary to improve their performance (e.g., by rapidly completing their work, simplifying the work process, or working for more hours) and to increase their engagement [96,103], and they even reduce their attention to safety rules to help their organization and to avoid losing their job. Moreover, individuals in a negative condition remember information more efficiently than those in a positive condition and persevere to complete the task [104,105]. Therefore, the threat of job loss in an insecure work context leads employees to engage fully and to adopt actions unrelated to safety that might slow down the work. Indeed, behaviors are related to what people are willing to accept in a condition of fear [106,107]. In this regard, Hayes et al. [106] have defined psychological acceptance as accepting emotions and thoughts rather than attempting to control them. Individuals with low acceptance tend to avoid situations that trigger negative emotions, such as fears related to negative consequences to career [106], to perceive a lower level of stress. Therefore, to decrease their stress level [81] and in this way restore their levels of well-being, employees accept their fear and increase their commitment, work engagement [99], and consequently, their performance at work [7,40,108,109]. Further, even if, in the organizational context, the information related to the possibility of loss job may elicit individual negative emotions, interaction and social support may reduce the negative effect of the environmental demands [31,75] and promote positive emotions. Regarding the relevance of social support, Nelissen and Selm [110] have shown that, when an organization communicates or socializes changing, giving support to the employees, positive responses are increased [111], and negative responses, such as fear, decrease. Notably, the social support strategies may increase employees' perceived capacity and may help employees meet the threats and support their goals [30,31]. Specifically, the social and organizational support urged employees to complete their tasks and makes them feel like protecting themselves and their organizations from likely individual dangers. Furthermore, support for each other increases cooperation, which in turn promotes giving and seeking information [112,113]. As previously described in the affect-as-information theory, sharing information among co-workers may elicit a new positive emotion and reduce the perceived risk.

Thus, we consider the novel possibility that workers in a fear state adopt actions unrelated to safety at work, which leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. *Fears are negatively associated with actions/behaviors related to safety at work.*

1.3. Study Aims and Summary Template

The present study attempts to ascertain the fears of employees in an economic crisis period, which is characterized by uncertainty and job insecurity, and the impact of such fears on employee well-being and on safety in an organization, in general.

In summary, to explore these relationships, we differentiate between two levels of analysis: subjective and objective. As regards the objective level, in a crisis period, people are aware of the difficulty involved in changing this adverse condition and lack the resources they require to face this situation; hence, they accept (objectively) the events that occur. By contrast, at the subjective level, in an organizational context (that has different groups), employees across levels share information and emotions through the organization's 'emotional culture'. In this context, the predominant uncertainty and the perceived turbulence of the context is communicated by the organization to itself. At the subjective level as well, individuals lack the necessary resources but accept this circumstance psychologically. This uncertainty and the lack of resources produce a negative emotional state and fear (or collective fears, combined in this study in the organizational context). However, in the organizational context, individuals evaluate if the threat is relevant or not and their capacity and resources to manage it. The appraisal will depend on the adaptive strategy used to protect the self and by the social support used to avoid the threat to employment. Thus, at the subjective level, if the appraisal process is successful, fears become an incentive for identifying solutions to help the organization (i.e., adopting an action unrelated to safety at work) tackle the crisis and thus avoid job loss. However, at the personal and collective levels, such actions have paradoxical effects and reduce well-being; in addition, although adopting such actions increases the fear of committing mistakes, over time, it favors the use of unsafe actions in the work context.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The study was conducted from February 2018 to March 2020 in 13 different companies in Italy: nine were construction companies and four were heavy industry companies. The research group of the University of Verona reviewed and approved this study before the study began. Employees of companies involved in a more extensive training program and action research project were invited to participate. The two sectors and 13 companies were chosen during a technical committee on occupational safety with trade unions, the main associations representing companies, and the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work with the scientific support of the researchers engaged in this study on the basis on the workplace annual accidents report. The participants were invited to participate in this study from the selected organizations, which took into account pre-standard criteria to select participants. Specifically, organizations considered participants' role in the organization, the number of near misses and accidents at work reported in the near misses and accident book. Participants were informed about the study's aims, and they gave verbal consent. They participated in 65 focus-group sessions, ranging from 1 h and 30 min to 2 h, which were conducted on each company's premises. A total of 217 employees participated: 180 workers, 19 managers, and 18 technicians (ten surveyors engineers and eight administrative staff). Participants were divided into several groups (comprising two to ten people) on the basis of their role in the organization, resulting in 26 worker groups and 13 manager/technician groups. Further, workers in the initial 26 groups later participated in 26 additional focus-group sessions.

2.2. Measures

In this study, we used a combination of strategies (or a mixed methods approach) [114], that is, we used qualitative as well as quantitative strategies. These two strategies were used in two different phases of data collection. We considered it appropriate to use a mixed methods approach to explore the concept of fear (that includes hidden meanings) in the focus-group sessions as well as to identify the most important fears and safety behaviors

for workers (qualitative approach). At the end of each focus group, participants completed a questionnaire on each fear and safety behaviors identified during the focus group and on a single question related on general well-being, the number of accidents at work, and the perceived probability of their making mistakes at work (quantitative approach). Participants were assigned a numerical score for each fear, each safety behaviors, and each single question related to the aforementioned constructs.

2.2.1. Data Collection (Qualitative Phase: Managers/Technicians and Workers)

In the qualitative phase, we conducted two series of focus groups: the first one with the worker groups and the company contact group to identify fears and the second with only those workers already involved in the first series of focus groups.

Worker and Manager/Technician Groups: Fear Identification

During 39 focus-group sessions, managers/technicians and workers in separate groups identified fears linked with job insecurity. We presented the aim of the focus group and asked the participants to introduce themselves and to discuss the concept of job insecurity and safety at work. During the discussion, the participants identified the fears (or factors) that emerged in the crisis period in Italy in 2015–2017 and those that were directly linked to job insecurity and hindered both organizational development and safety at work. At the end of each discussion, the main concepts that were identified were explained to the participants, who then labelled them. On completion of the first qualitative phase, the quantitative phase commenced, as described in the Section 2.2.2.

Workers (Additional Focus Group): Safety Behavior Identification

Further, 26 focus groups were conducted later with workers already involved in the previous focus-group sessions. We presented the previously labelled fears to them and asked them to identify the most important safety behaviors, which we had already labelled. After a focus-group session with workers, the quantitative phase commenced.

2.2.2. Data Collection Focus Group (Quantitative Phase)

Before administering the questionnaire, we presented the set of questions of the instrument and discussed with participants the concept of the perceived probability of making mistakes at work, well-being, and accidents.

Participants in the questionnaire indicated the following:

- The relevance/importance of each labelled fear with respect to job insecurity and the extent to which they felt fearful, by assigning numerical scores on two 5-point Likert scales. On one scale, the scores ranged from 1 = *not important* to 5 = *very important*, which indicated the relevance/importance of the fear, and on the other, from 1 = *low* to 5 = *high*, which indicated the extent of fear perceived. For the present sample, Cronbach's alpha = 0.86.
- The perceived probability of making mistakes on the job was measured with a single item. They rated this probability on a 100-point scale, ranging from *no probability* (=0) to *highest probability* (=100).
- The number of accidents and near misses that had occurred in the past 3 years were remembered or reported in the organizational accidents' or near-misses' book. These two variables were aggregated in a single variable, 'accidents'. This variable comprises the total number of accidents and near misses indicated by each participant.
- Their general level of well-being (measured with a single items), which they rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *low* (=1) to *high* (=5).

Each worker invited to participated in a subsequent focus-group session also indicated the following: the three most important behaviors to promote safety in their organization and the frequency of use each of these behaviors at work by ranking these on a 5-point Likert scale, assigning scores ranging from *never* (=1) to *always* (=5).

For the second and later groups of participants, after the qualitative phase was repeated for each group, the factors (fears and behaviors) previously identified and labelled were submitted to each group. All participants provided a numerical score for each factor identified in all focus groups. For the present sample, Cronbach's alpha = 0.93. Only managers did not indicate a numerical score since they had indicated fears that were completely different from those proposed by workers. Managers identified objective and external factors (e.g., fees and political issues), which were not comparable with employees' fears.

For each measure, the score used in the analyses was the mean of the item responses.

2.2.3. Socio-Demographic and Occupational Variables

Participants who provided complete data during the focus groups were all men ($N = 217$); we did not ask them to state their age, but some of them stated it. Participants provided information on the duration of employment (six categories, from one year = 1, to over 40 years = 6), which ranged from 1 to 40 years ($M = 17.57$; $SD = 10.69$); the majority of participants (58) had worked for 21–30 years; 43 participants for 11–20 years, 41 for 1–5 years, 20 participants for 6–10 years, and the remaining 16 for 31 years or more. Only two participants had more than 40 years of company experience.

2.3. Data Analysis

We analyzed the collected fears and safety behaviors along with the participants and helped them to clarify the meaning, similarities, and differences. Participants labelled fears and safety behaviors and assigned scores on a 5-point Likert scale to each concept independently. Further, they filled a questionnaire that included self-report measures. For the analysis, only the fears and behaviors common to all focus groups and assessed as important by all participants were considered. We performed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) [115] and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) [116] to test the one-dimensional or multidimensional factorial structure of fears and safety behaviors. The CFA results confirm that each of the two construct measures (i.e., fears and safety behaviors) could be treated as unidimensional, with a good model fit, respectively, with the following indices satisfying standard criteria [116,117]: $\chi^2 = 19.591$, $df = 19$; $p = 0.420$; CFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.013; SRMR = 0.045, and $\chi^2 = 22.512$, $df = 16$; $p = 0.127$; CFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.048; SRMR = 0.032. We used the AMOS statistical package in SPSS version 20 for the CFAs. We performed the hypothesis tests within a multivariate and hierarchical linear regression framework using SPSS version 20.

3. Results

3.1. Focus Group Analysis: Collection of Data on Fears

The results of 65 focus groups (52 worker groups and 13 manager/technician groups) showed the main fears associated with the job insecurity generated by the crisis. Workers identified 11 common fears, as presented in Table 1, whereas managers and technicians identified five. The fears of workers differed from those of managers/technicians. Managers described 'objective' and external factors: the need to reduce red tape, the cost of safety at work and operational costs, workers' responsibility, inappropriate policy, concerns related to politicians, and high fees for organizations. However, we did not view those factors as fears (i.e., subjective negative emotions) but, rather, as objective factors. Thus, these factors were not comparable with workers' fears. Therefore, we included only the workers' fears in the analysis. Only some managers in the sample expressed a fear for the future and the possibility that the company could close, but these fears were not common across this sample.

Table 1. Fears associated with job insecurity in a sample of workers ($N = 180$).

No.	Fears	Description
1.	Clarity of organizational goals	Fear of not understanding organizational goals. Goals are not clearly communicated by the company.
2.	Company closure	Fear that the company will close because of them. They will lose the job and salary needed for their family.
3.	Company goals not achieved	Fear that the company will not achieve the minimum goals required for survival and fear of market competition (even in association with too many fees at work).
4.	Inability to help	Fear regarding inability to support the company to get through this negative situation (associated with little awareness of own ability and political responsibility).
5.	Absence of information	Fear owing to lack of all correct information (associated with perceived quality and quantity of the information itself). Company lacks the ability to transfer information to its employees.
6.	Inability to complete tasks	Fear of not completing tasks in time. People perceive pressure and hence speed up their actions but do not know the correct duration for task completion.
7.	Lack of instruments to overcome the crisis	Fear of being unable to overcome an external crisis.
8.	Inability to give more	Fear that they cannot give more because norms are an obstacle.
9.	Negative evaluation	Fear of receiving a negative evaluation from the company rather than from co-workers. Company does not provide instruments to evaluate oneself.
10.	Inability to find solutions	Fear of not finding an effective or a new solution to solve the situation and to take the risk.
11.	Guilt	Fear of being judged guilty by the company for not having done everything they should have to help it (i.e., people feel guilty but are unable to produce useful results). Company communicates messages accusing workers.

3.2. Focus Group Analysis: Safety Behaviors Collections

The results of 52 focus groups with workers showed the most used safety behaviors. Workers identified 10 common safety behaviors, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Safety behaviors in a sample of workers ($N = 180$).

No.	Description
1.	Defining and sharing actions for work tasks
2.	Informing in writing
3.	Using work equipment properly
4.	Identifying risks before commencing work
5.	Affixing safety and risk signals
6.	Facilitating the integration of new workers
7.	Gratifying workers
8.	Sharing methods related to work
9.	Storing work equipment in the appropriate places
10.	Defining roles

3.3. Descriptive Statistics

Means (SDs) and bivariate correlations among the measured variables are presented in Table 3. Fear was significantly positively associated with well-being, accident, and safety behaviors but not with the probability of making mistakes. The duration of employment in the organization was not correlated with the other constructs.

Table 3. Study variables: descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations ($N = 180$).

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
Duration of Employment	17.26	10.8	1					
Fear	3.16	0.746	0.058	1				
Safety Behaviors	3.08	1.13	−0.085	−0.714 **	1			
Accident	3.99	1.01	0.088	−146 *	−0.177 *	1		
Probability of Making Mistakes	41.3	29.5	0.071	0.005	0.007	0.037	1	
Well-being	3.24	1.52	−0.063	−0.840 **	0.867 **	−0.207 **	−0.093	1

Note: For duration of employment: six categories (from one year = 1, to over 40 years = 6). The probability of making mistakes ranged from 0 (*no probability*) to 100 (*highest probability*). All other variables were measured on a 5-point scale, with higher values indicating a greater level of the construct. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

3.4. Hypothesis Tests

We found that the duration of employment in the organization did not contribute significantly to explaining the dependent variables in the multivariate regression analyses.

3.4.1. Test for Hypothesis 1

The hierarchical linear regression analysis results confirmed a negative association between fear and well-being ($p < 0.001$), as reported for Models 2 in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analyses of the independent and interactive associations of fear and duration of employment (DE) with well-being ($N = 180$).

Well-Being						
	Model 1			Model 2		
Model 1	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
DE	−0.103	−1.375	0.171	−0.019	−0.455	0.650
Model 2 +FEAR				−0.839	−20.499	<0.001
R^2	0.011			0.707		
Adjusted R^2	0.005			0.703		
Omnibus test of regression		$F(1, 178) = \text{n.s.}$			$F(2, 177) = 213.284^{***}$	

*** $p < 0.005$.

3.4.2. Test for Hypothesis 2

The hierarchical linear regression analysis results did not confirm that fear was associated with the probability of making mistakes ($p > 0.05$), as reported for Model 2 in Table 5.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analyses of the independent and interactive associations of fear and duration of employment (DE) with the probability of making mistakes ($N = 180$).

Probability of Making Mistakes						
	Model 1			Model 2		
Model 1	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
DE	0.088	1.176	0.241	−0.088	1.172	0.243
Model 2 +FEAR				−0.003	−0.045	0.964
R^2	0.008			0.008		
Adjusted R^2	0.002			0.003		
Omnibus test of regression		$F(1, 178) = \text{n.s.}$			$F(2, 177) = \text{n.s.}$	

3.4.3. Test for Hypothesis 3

The hierarchical linear regression analysis results did not confirm that fear was associated with the number of ‘accidents’ ($p > 0.05$), as reported for Model 2 in Table 6.

Table 6. Hierarchical regression analyses of the independent and interactive associations of fear and duration of employment (DE) with accidents ($N = 180$).

Accidents						
	Model 1			Model 2		
Model 1	β	t	p	β	t	p
DE	0.099	1.326	0.187	0.085	1.143	0.255
Model 2 +FEAR.				0.138	1.852	0.066
R^2	0.010			0.029		
Adjusted R^2	0.004			0.018		
Omnibus test of regression		$F(1, 178) = \text{n.s.}$			$F(2, 177) = \text{n.s.}$	

3.4.4. Test for Hypothesis 4

The hierarchical linear regression analysis results confirmed a negative association between fear and safety behaviors ($p < 0.001$), as reported for Model 2 in Table 7.

Table 7. Hierarchical regression analyses of the independent and interactive associations of fear and duration of employment (DE) with safety behaviors ($N = 180$).

Safety Behaviors						
	Model 1			Model 2		
Model 1	β	t	p	β	t	p
DE	−0.139	−1.875	0.062	−0.068	−1.299	0.196
Model 2 +FEAR				−0.708	−13.477	<0.001
R^2	0.019			0.014		
Adjusted R^2	0.515			0.509		
Omnibus test of regression		$F(1, 178) = \text{n.s.}$			$F(2, 177) = 93.946^{***}$	

*** $p < 0.005$.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to identify the most important fears and behaviors related to safety at work in the organization and the effect of those fears on well-being, safety behaviors, number of accidents, and perceived probability of making mistakes in the organizations. Consistent with previous studies [30–32,82,107], we found a negative association between the main factor of fear and well-being (Hypothesis 1). Further, owing to the economic crisis, to reduce their level of stress caused by the threat of job loss, people accept the fear condition [107], engaging with increased effort [31,96,103] and improving their performance [18,99] even at the cost of paying limited attention to safety behaviors [23]. In keeping with these studies, we found a negative association between fear and safety behaviors at work (Hypothesis 4). In this regard, we may note that safety behaviors, described in Table 2 (such as worker gratification, work assignments, written information, and storing equipment) seems to be not strictly related to safety but to organizational efficiency. It could be important to verify the relationship between efficiency and safety behaviors in future studies.

However, we did not find an association between fears, the perceived probability of making mistakes (Hypothesis 2), and the number of accidents (Hypothesis 3). Although these results do not support our hypotheses, they align with the findings of previous studies that have highlighted that people in uncertain conditions, but in a positive emotional state,

are more willing to take risks [18,33,96–98]. Presumably, although individuals are in a negative emotional state related to the fear of job loss, on the one hand they accept circumstances (Hayes et al. [106]) and fears (as shown by the relatively low value of fear, $M = 3.19$ on a scale from 1 to 5), and on the other hand, based on the literature cited above, they try to change this negative situation by taking risks, to reduce the related emotional stress [81]. This interpretation needs further testing in future research.

It is relevant to note here the importance of organizational and co-worker supports that is associated with positive responses [111] and the decreasing of fear. Specifically, social support strategies may increase employees' perceived capacity and may help employees meet the threats and support their goals [30,31].

In this study, workers asserted that they take risks, but we did not find a positive association between fears and accidents at work. This unexpected result could be attributable to numerous factors that prevent accidents at work (e.g., co-workers and company support, luck, and safety equipment) but also to the relatively low level of the probability of making mistakes in this study ($M = 41.3$ on a scale from 1 to 100). An alternative explanation that should be tested in the future could be related to interaction between co-workers and social support that reducing the negative effect of the environmental demands [30,31] promote positive emotions that in turn reduce perceived risk.

Thus, these results align with the affect-as-information-theory, which describes the informational capacity of emotions that serve to orient judgements [28,92,94] and behaviors. However, in a crisis period, workers seem able to orient their negative emotions to meet organizational demands [31], take risks, and display their emotions [62,118], which conforms their internal affection and compliance with organizational expectations. Thus, with 'deep acting', they also avoid the emotional dissonance and related negative consequences, such as emotional exhaustion, e.g., anger and depression [64].

Such results are relevant to orienting workers' performance and improving their well-being at the workplace while also assigning the appropriate degree of importance to emotional states to prevent accidents and mistakes at work. For example, managers could ascertain workers' emotional states before workers commence working and remind them about the appropriate behaviors they should adopt, particularly during an economic crisis period. To prevent accidents, managers can ensure that workers have the required information related to their tasks and that they have understood this information, which would reduce the possibility of workers feeling negative emotions or even feeling too positive, because both types of emotions are able to produce negative effects (e.g., on safety at work).

This study underlines how fear can play a role in improving or decreasing performance at work and well-being. The results also suggest that, when a negative situation modifies their emotions, information, and social support may be particularly important for orienting employees' emotions to meet work and organizational demands in that situation. For instance, information may result in employees experiencing negative emotions but may also support them to think positively and thus increase their engagement at work and their adaptive responses to organizational goals.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

This main strength of this study is the alternate use of qualitative as well as quantitative strategies (or a mixed methods approach; [114]) to explore little-known organizational phenomena. These two strategies were also used in different phases of data collection. Adopting this approach ensures that findings are grounded in the participants' work experience. In addition, homogeneity in some characteristics of the sample (chosen by a technical committee on the basis on specific and relevant characteristics for safety at work with the support of the researchers involved in this study) would rule out alternative explanations due to participants' gender, tenure, and duration of employment. Specifically, the sample consisted only of men who had worked at least several years in similar jobs and shared similar fears

However, the study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not support establishing causal inferences. Second, our sample was relatively small. Third, we selected respondents on the basis of specific characteristics, as mentioned above, but considering suitable participants and organizations. Selecting the sample on the basis of the convenient and accessibility (also known as convenience sampling method) does not give all individuals of the populations the equal possibility of participating in this study, thus the sample is not representative of the population. A larger sample in different work contexts would be needed to design a more complex model of fear and its related work outcomes and interrelated variables.

5. Conclusions

Our findings provide organizations and managers information based on which they can establish interventions to reduce the negative consequences related to individual employees' well-being, performance, and safety at work. Further, the results point to promising direction for future research and for establishing good practices in organizations. Future studies could explore the negative and positive effects of fear on employees and on important work-related outcomes using repeated measures. It might be interesting to evaluate the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on the sample we examined. Equally interesting could be to focus on the relationship between fear and well-being in other organizational settings during the COVID-19 and in relation to the effects of the pandemic on negative or positive fears and on general emotional state of the employees. It may also be analyzing the relationship among personal and contextual variables. In addition, studies could examine the paradoxical effect of the employees'/workers' need to engage harder (improving performance) but reduce the focus on safety at work. Open questions can be asked, referring to the moderating effect of fear on psychological acceptance and risk association. Fear could be considered a moderating variable between job insecurity and organizational variables (e.g., climate, organizational culture, well-being, and performance). Further, many variables interact with fear in reducing its negative effect on safety at work such as communication and social support. Future studies could identify behaviors related to fears in the organization within a wide construct of fear that we define, because of the results of this study as 'organizational fear' are 'molar negative feelings of fear related to organizational conditions that produce a sense of helplessness and lack of control on negative consequences for organizations when their goals are not achieved (independent of the real organizational conditions)'. In other words, 'organizational fear' is the unaware emotive and subjective interpretation of emotive culture (i.e., collective interpretation) due to the information produced and communicated by the organization that serves to support itself but is detrimental to employees. Thus, because they desire to solve company problems as well as fear that they will attract negative evaluations, individuals adopt approval behaviors (i.e., they are creative and do not comply with organizational norms) that conflict with their health and well-being.

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