

In a no-win situation: The employment–health dilemma

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Funding information

Hans-Böckler Foundation, Grant/Award Number: P-2020-423-4

Abstract

Work and organizational psychology (WOP) research has to date mostly focused on people privileged to have the choice between several attractive job options and less on people who are restricted in their job choice (e.g., due to their qualification or personal contingencies) and have to choose from fewer and often less-than-optimal jobs. Often, the jobs available to the latter are characterized by precarious employment and hazardous working conditions which can put them in the difficult situation of having to choose between a health-threatening job and possible unemployment. Building on interdisciplinary literature, we propose the employment–health dilemma (E-H dilemma) as a framework for analyzing this intrapersonal conflict of having to choose between employment (incurring health threats) and health (incurring economic threats) and discuss potential antecedents and consequences of the E-H dilemma at the societal, organizational, and individual level. We outline the implications of the E-H dilemma and make a case for examining the full spectrum of job choice situations in WOP research. In doing so, we demonstrate what WOP can gain by embracing a more inclusive and multidisciplinary

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approach: uncovering processes in their entirety (e.g., job choice decisions of all people) and strengthening the role and legitimacy of WOP in society.

KEYWORDS

decision-making, job choice, occupational health psychology, precarious employment, social inequalities, well-being, work and organizational psychology, workplace hazards

INTRODUCTION

Inherent to large parts of traditional work and organizational psychological (WOP) research is the implicit (neoliberal) assumption that people have the “freedom to choose (and leave) their employer, the freedom to negotiate for [themselves], the freedom to design [their] time arrangements, and the freedom to manage and design [their] career and development at work” (Bal & Dóci, 2018, p. 540). Accordingly, the respective literature tends to focus on people who have the freedom to choose between several attractive job options, that is, mostly well-educated members of the middle-class (e.g., Richardson, 2012), and thus can ponder the costs (e.g., time and energy spent on work, tasks that can impede their physical or mental health) and benefits (e.g., salary, social security, and tasks that can satisfy their interests) of each option to choose the most advantageous one (Blustein et al., 2008).

However, freedom of job choice is a privilege that not all people enjoy. Work in capitalism reproduces social inequalities (Kozan et al., 2019; Richardson, 2012; van Dijk et al., 2020) and as a consequence, resources (e.g., education and personal networks) that provide access to jobs, or at least attractive jobs, are unequally distributed along the lines of, for example, gender, ethnicity, and social class (Blustein, 2013; Jamil et al., 2012; Owens, 2018). Thus, many people do not have access to jobs that readily accommodate their interests, hopes, and values (see also Bal & Dóci, 2018; Blustein et al., 2008). To them, jobs are first and foremost a means to make a living (Blustein et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2014).

Psychological research has long explored the spectrum of needs that people seek to satisfy in their life, ranging from physiological (e.g., food and clothing) and safety needs (e.g., job security), over needs for affiliation (e.g., social relationships) to needs for status/esteem and self-actualization (see, e.g., Maslow, 1943). Although various conceptions of categories and hierarchies of needs exist, it is more or less agreed upon that people seek to satisfy their various needs with varying priority, depending on their specific circumstances at a given time. We argue that the implicit assumption that people can freely choose and leave their employers and jobs (Bal & Dóci, 2018) constitutes the basis of many research fields and respective theories in WOP. While job choice and recruiting (Rynes & Cable, 2003) represents the most obvious research field affected by this implicit assumption, other fields like research on job characteristics, work design, and job satisfaction often build on the assumption that people freely choose their job and seek to satisfy their self-actualization needs as a priority. Here, prominent research topics in WOP are whether work satisfies a sense of calling (e.g., Dik & Duffy, 2009), provides growth and development opportunities (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976), or motivates intrinsically (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2010) and whether organizations are congruent to personal interests and values (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996). Yet, satisfying self-actualization needs might not be a priority

for people who are restricted in their job choice and who are in the first place preoccupied with providing for the livelihood of themselves and their family. Thus, the narrow focus we witness in large parts of the current WOP literature might misrepresent the perspective of a non-negligible proportion of people.

Therefore, we join the call of other researchers to broaden the perspective in WOP research to also consider those people with “less-than-optimal levels of choice in their work life” (e.g., Blustein, 2013, p. 5), who are overrepresented in low-wage jobs such as cleaning, agriculture, or construction. While people in these jobs are rarely the focus of research and society, they are the backbone of a society as they ‘keep things going’. We intend to contribute to answering this call by conceptualizing a dilemma these people tend to face, which is the dilemma of having to choose between a health-threatening job and possible unemployment.

Our conceptualization of this dilemma is based on critical perspectives in WOP (e.g., Islam & Sanderson, 2021; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Volpert, 1975), labor sociology (e.g., Brinkmann et al., 2006), and occupational health (e.g., Benach et al., 2014; Muntaner, 2016). This spectrum of disciplines ensures an adequate consideration of societal factors (e.g., economic, historical, political, and cultural factors) that underlie organizational and individual psychological processes (e.g., McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012; Santiago-Delefosse, 2015; Szaflarski & Vaughn, 2015). As we will explain later, acknowledging these societal factors (instead of concentrating on the individual or the organization alone) is vital as they do not only influence the occurrence of this dilemma but also individuals’ possibilities for dealing with it (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Murray, 2015). Additionally, we draw on cognitive psychology to inform our conceptualization on how people generally perceive, process, and deal with different types of decision conflicts and dilemmas (e.g., Diederich, 2003).

THE EMPLOYMENT-HEALTH DILEMMA

Jobs available to people who are restricted in their job choice, for instance, due to their education or personal contingencies, are often characterized by precarious employment and hazardous working conditions (e.g., Mosthaf et al., 2011; Virick & McKee-Ryan, 2014). Precarious employment consists of multiple dimensions that involve insecurity, such as low wages, low levels of regulatory protection, employment insecurity, and so forth (Vosko, 2010), while hazardous working conditions entail physical, chemical, ergonomic, biological, and psychosocial hazards (Benach et al., 2014). Therefore, people who are restricted in their job choice are more likely—than others with a larger set of options to choose from—to face the dilemma of having to choose between accepting/keeping a hazardous job to avoid economic threats (*choosing employment*) and rejecting/quitting a hazardous job to avoid health threats (*choosing health*). We refer to this intrapersonal conflict as the *employment-health dilemma* (E-H dilemma, graphically depicted in Figure 1).

The possibility to choose generally implies a conflict (Diederich, 2003). Lewin (1935) differentiated three types of conflict: Approach–approach conflicts (the choice between two or more attractive options), approach–avoidance conflicts (when the choice for an attractive option has unattractive side-effects), and avoidance–avoidance conflicts, which imply a no-win situation (the choice between two or more unattractive options). Our proposed E-H dilemma represents the latter, while (the more often researched) situation of having to choose one job out of several attractive offers represents an approach–approach conflict.

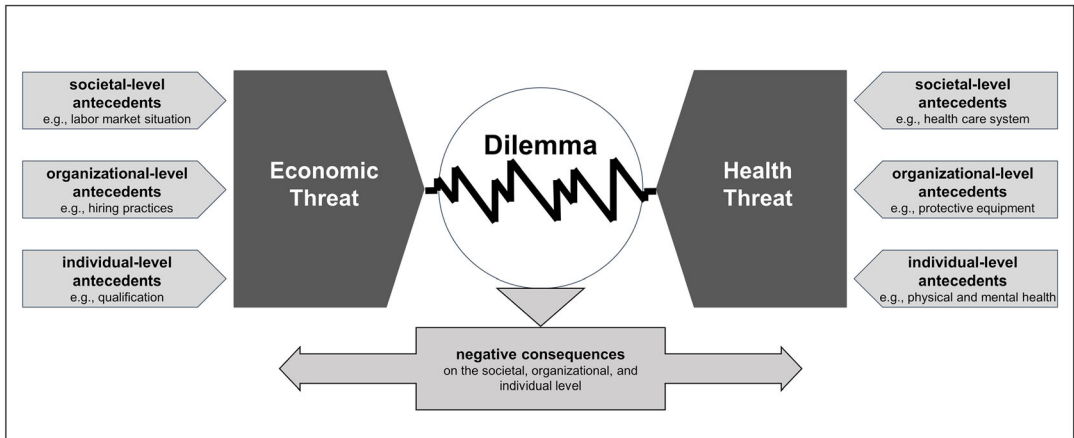


FIGURE 1 The interplay of societal-, organizational-, and individual-level antecedents in creating the employment–health dilemma

Cognitive psychologists have examined whether decision-makers' reactions vary between these three types of conflict and indeed found that decision-makers needed the most time to resolve avoidance–avoidance conflicts (Dhar & Nowlis, 1999; Diederich, 2003). This difference in decision duration might indicate that decision-makers defer the decision or do not decide at all due to decision difficulties that result from negative emotions, which are involved in avoidance–avoidance conflicts (Anderson, 2003). Applied to the job choice context, avoidance–avoidance conflicts might make people not only postpone a decision but also not decide at all. They might be afflicted by the status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), that is, choosing the current state because they want to avoid regrets, have an aversion against losses, or assume the state to be good because it has been in existence for so long (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012). In the case of the E-H dilemma, the bias could mean that a worker does not choose to leave a health-threatening job because it represents the status quo. Similarly, yet referring to less threatening circumstances, Canivet et al. (2017) describe people's reaction to avoidance–avoidance conflicts regarding job choice as “feeling locked-in”: People experience the feeling of being locked-in to a secure but non-desired job or occupation when labor market precariousness increases, and they do not dare to leave their current safe but non-desired job or occupation out of fear of not being able to find new employment.

A MULTILEVEL PERSPECTIVE ON THE EMPLOYMENT–HEALTH DILEMMA

Acknowledging that the decision situation described (i.e., the E-H dilemma) is qualitatively different from that of people who can choose between several attractive options, it is important to explore the antecedents that contribute to bringing people into this dilemma as well as the consequences it entails. In line with previous research on work and social inequalities (e.g., van Dijk et al., 2020), we structure our proposition of antecedents and consequences of the E-H dilemma according to a multilevel perspective, differentiating the *societal*, *organizational*, and *individual* level. A multilevel perspective, particularly one including the societal level, is helpful

to go beyond the traditional individualistic focus of WOP that often places an overly large responsibility on the individual for their choices and decisions despite the structural and material factors that might strongly affect them (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Zyphur, 2009; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012; Murray, 2015; Szaflarski & Vaughn, 2015).

Moreover, a multilevel perspective allows to examine whether and how these factors influence and interact with each other across different levels (see also Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013). It is possible that higher level factors influence lower level factors (e.g., the labor market situation influences whether organizations must provide their workers with good working conditions to keep them) and vice versa (e.g., unsatisfied individual workers may come together to form collectives to protest against their poor working conditions). Another possibility is that factors at the same level influence each other (e.g., having an illness may also restrict individual workers' possibilities for moving).

Antecedents of the employment–health dilemma

In the following, we collated exemplary (and not an exhaustive list of) factors on the aforementioned three levels that potentially contribute to placing people in this dilemma (see Figure 1), namely, that restrict their choices and increase their dependencies to such an extent that the only choice they are left with is the one between a hazardous job and possible unemployment.

Antecedents at the societal level

The societal level includes several sublevels with associated antecedents, such as the country (e.g., regulations and laws), region (e.g., regionally spread beliefs and prejudices), and community (e.g., mean-level socioeconomic status). Antecedents at these sublevels might interact with each other (e.g., national-level laws may influence the infrastructure of communities, which might change the labor market situation in these communities).

One important societal-level antecedent is *precarization*, that is, the erosion of standard employment relationships with its labor standards and welfare-state safeguards (Brinkmann et al., 2006; Janowitz, 2006), and its normalization and acceptance in society. The period of economic boom after World War II provided workers in advanced capitalist economies with relatively secure employment relationships.¹ However, since the 1970s oil crises, governments in these economies eroded labor standards, which gave rise to large accumulations of capital and precarious employment (Kalleberg, 2009; Muntaner, 2016). As a consequence, workers have been more and more exposed to lower and less stable incomes (e.g., temporary jobs below the minimum wage), fewer or no health benefits, and a lack of social security (Brinkmann et al., 2006). Due to socialization in these times, workers might come to view precarious employment as a “natural law” (i.e., “just part of the job”; Marx, 1962; Volpert, 1975), which might in turn sustain this precarious employment. Finally, a lack of labor protection laws allows for hazardous jobs and legitimates them in a society which makes it difficult or even impossible for workers to protest. Taken together, the erosion of labor standards and labor protection laws in advanced capitalist economies prepared the ground for the E-H dilemma.

Another societal-level antecedent of the E-H dilemma is the *marginalization* of certain societal groups, for example, based on gender, ethnicity, and social class. Marginalization in a society attributes roles to members of certain groups that can prevent them from fully participating

in the economic, social, and political life enjoyed by large parts of society (Alakhunova et al., 2015). On average, marginalized groups in society have a higher likelihood of entering precarious employment (Witteveen, 2017) and have a lower societal status than others, which implies that these groups are more likely to suffer from social inequalities (e.g., Richardson, 2012; Turner et al., 2014). Once they have entered precarious employment, they have even fewer options to save money or to rely on an infrastructure that helps them through times of illness or unemployment, which forces them to stay in or accept hazardous jobs.

Ethnic minorities, as one example of a marginalized group, often face discrimination inside and outside of paid work (Turner et al., 2014). For example, a study on the online recruitment platform of the Swiss public employment service showed that recruiters were 4–19% less likely to contact ethnic minority members than majority members (the percentage varied by country of origin; Hangartner et al., 2021). Such employment discrimination significantly limits the job options of ethnic minority applicants. Additionally, legal barriers often push ethnic minorities into precarious employment, especially if they are immigrants. For example, Hispanic immigrant farm and construction workers in the United States stated that they accepted hazardous jobs because these were the only ones available for people without official papers (Menzel & Gutierrez, 2010; Salazar et al., 2004).

Another example of a marginalized group are women, who also face discrimination in hiring processes. For example, an analysis of the Labour Force Survey showed evidence for employment discrimination against women in Greece and the United Kingdom (Livanos et al., 2009). Moreover, women do most of the unpaid care work (Hobler et al., 2020; Richardson, 2012) that additionally restricts their job choices. For instance, women might be restricted to certain working hours or a workplace near their home to be able to combine work and care responsibilities.

Taken together, neoliberal ideology and related societal factors such as eroded labor standards and protection laws are a basis for the E-H dilemma by increasing both precarious employment and hazardous working conditions. At the same time, neoliberalism fosters societal phenomena, like the marginalization of specific groups, that prevents people from full access to (attractive) jobs. Using the examples of ethnic minorities and women, we showed that consequences of marginalization, like hiring discrimination as well as legal barriers and unevenly distributed care work, can restrict people's job choices to an extent that they perceive little alternatives than to work in hazardous jobs, which increases their likelihood to experience the E-H dilemma.

Antecedents at the organizational level

Like the societal level, the organizational level includes several sublevels with associated antecedents, such as the organization (e.g., organizational culture), the team (e.g., the way tasks are assigned), and the work context (e.g., safety measures at a specific workplace, intensification of work). Antecedents at these sublevels might also interact with each other (e.g., management policies that affect workplace-specific rules and thus workers in these workplaces).

Hazards in the workplace do not inevitably or automatically create the health threats inherent to the E-H dilemma. Whether people perceive a health threat can be influenced by several determinants. One determinant is organizations' *willingness to invest in the protection of their workers* against these hazards (Feng et al., 2014). This willingness depends, among other factors,

on how replaceable organizations perceive these workers to be. For instance, a physician who treats infectious diseases may experience a lower health threat than a cleaner who works in rooms where infectious patients are or have been treated. While both the physician and the cleaner share the same workplace, their working conditions may differ considerably (e.g., regarding access to protective clothing and equipment; Shelton et al., 2021). According to human capital theory, organizations strategically differentiate regarding their investments in their workforce between “the most valuable and/or unique human capital [...] and] lower value and more easily replaceable human capital” (Clinton & Guest, 2013, p. 531). Hence, organizations make targeted investments in job offers and working conditions for highly sought-after applicants and workers to compete with other organizations over them. Conversely, applicants and workers in less sought-after jobs, who are perceived as easily replaceable by organizations, can hardly hope to enjoy the same working conditions including protection against hazards (Clinton & Guest, 2013). Another related determinant is whether supervisors support their workers in protection against hazards regarding instrumental (e.g., additional protective clothing and equipment) and informational aspects (e.g., safety training; Heaney & Hoppe, 2017).

Lower levels of workplace safety, including low protection against hazards, is more common in organizations that provide workers with *precarious employment* (Aronsson, 1999; Muntaner et al., 2010). For instance, Bamford (2015) conducted interviews with different stakeholders in the horticulture industry in the United Kingdom and Australia finding that high levels of exposure to pesticides correlated with precarious employment in terms of pay and hours. Most of the organizations sampled in the study did not directly employ workers (Bamford, 2015). Especially in hazardous jobs, organizations make increasingly use of contract workers as well as workers employed at subcontractors or subsidiaries. For instance, in 2013, 66% of German hospitals had cleaners outsourced to subcontractors or subsidiaries (Statista Research Department, 2013). Despite the lack of a classical employer-employee relationship, the employment conditions for these workers are also set by the organization but can vary considerably between directly employed workers and contract workers or workers employed at subcontractors or subsidiaries (Howard, 2017). More specifically, workers who are not directly employed by the organization they work for often experience lower payment, poorer working conditions, insufficient co-determination rights, and a lack of dismissal protection (Hertwig et al., 2015; Klein-Schneider & Beutler, 2013).

Taken together, these examples show that organizations have a considerable share in whether or not their workers experience health threats, due to hazards on the job and the availability of protective measures, and economic threats, like precarious employment and contract work, thus influencing workers' likelihood of experiencing the E-H dilemma.

Antecedents at the individual level

Antecedents at the individual level that limit people's options to freely choose, negotiate, and influence the conditions of their jobs (and thus contribute to getting people in the E-H dilemma) can be personal, private, and biographical factors (e.g., education or personal contingencies that increase people's dependence on employment).

People's *education* (knowledge, skills, and abilities) against the backdrop of the current labor market determines their employment perspectives and bargaining power (i.e., their employability; Hillage & Pollard, 1998).² This interplay between education and labor market demands is exemplified by German immigration laws that welcome immigrants who are

trained in professions with a current shortage of skilled workers in the country (e.g., nursing), while others who lack respective training face greater obstacles (Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, 2018). In addition, people with highly sought-after qualifications or high-status professions (e.g., physicians) enjoy considerable bargaining power in hiring negotiations and thus have greater leveraging power when it comes to individually negotiating working conditions for themselves that better protect them against hazards.³ In contrast, Hispanic construction workers in the U.S. reported that many of their supervisors would replace them or offer no further jobs to them if they spoke up about hazards or demanded better protective clothing and equipment. Thus, the only choice they had was to accept or decline jobs with hazardous working conditions (Roelofs et al., 2011). Both access to decent alternative employment and bargaining power could help workers to solve the E-H dilemma. The first option enables them to leave the hazardous job for a decent alternative, while the second option enables them to negotiate better protective measures for their work in order to mitigate health threats posed by potential hazards. However, if workers do not have a highly sought-after education, which determines job options and bargaining power, solving the E-H dilemma becomes much harder.

Another important individual-level antecedent that can restrict people's job choices is the degree to which people depend on employment. This *dependence* may be due, for example, to people's economic situation, residence status, or insurance status. People who have access to sufficient monetary means and social security to overcome a period of unemployment for themselves and their families do not depend on immediate (re-)employment and thus can quit or reject hazardous jobs more easily. In contrast, people without such means cannot solve the E-H dilemma by simply quitting or rejecting hazardous jobs if they have no alternative employment. Their personal situation might force them to stay in or take on hazardous jobs and repeatedly face the E-H dilemma. For example, a precarious residence status can increase people's dependence on employment; for example, in Germany, more than half a million immigrants have a residence permit that expires if they lose their job or job training (German Federal Statistical Office, 2019). Another reason that increases people's dependence on their employment can be insurance status. In the United States, health insurance is usually not provided by the state but by employers. And thus, job loss also means the loss of health insurance, which increases the pressure to stay in the current employment (Gruber, 2000).

Education and dependence on the job but also personal contingencies (e.g., care responsibilities that restrict possible working hours or tie people to a particular locality) might affect job choice and turnover decisions to a large extent but remain largely unexplored or unconsidered by WOP research (see also Blustein et al., 2008). Broadening the perspective in WOP research to include people at all levels of job and career choices could provide more accurate and holistic insights into people's job choice processes and how factors inside and outside of work affect these (Richardson, 2012).

Consequences of the employment–health dilemma

As with the antecedents, we discuss exemplary consequences of the E-H dilemma at the societal, organizational, and individual level. The consequences resulting from the E-H dilemma may manifest at the same levels and sublevels as the antecedents, but cross-level effects are similarly possible (e.g., even if a particular person is experiencing the E-H dilemma mainly due to organizational antecedents, its consequences may manifest also at the societal and individual

level). Most of the consequences we discuss in the following sustain or strengthen the E-H dilemma and its antecedents.

Consequences at the societal level

Consequences at the societal level can be observed at one or multiple sublevels, for example, the country, region, and community. These consequences include further precarization and marginalization, among others.

Similar to precarious employment in general, the E-H dilemma and its threats may function as a *disciplinary measure* or “*mode of domination*” (Bourdieu, 1998; see also Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Possibly, both the experience and the observation of both economic and health threats and the resulting E-H dilemma can sustain and strengthen precarization. Experiencing such threats and uncertainties reduces rational planning and hopes that workers need to resist both individually and collectively (Bourdieu, 1998; see also Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). But also observing these threats can be powerful. Workers, who do not (yet) belong to the disadvantaged parts of the workforce, are disciplined by seeing others who are worse off regarding the E-H dilemma and its components. Although these unaffected workers may face fewer threats, they have something to lose and their replaceability becomes more salient to them, which silences them as well (Bourdieu, 1998). As a consequence, they may downplay their own concerns and problems, work extra hard to justify their advantaged position, or break strikes (Brinkmann et al., 2006).

Another consequence of the E-H dilemma at the societal level can be that affected people and the societal groups they belong to develop different expectations, here meaning *lower expectations*, regarding appropriate jobs and working conditions. One possibility to reduce the emotional impact of an aversive situation, for example being stuck in the E-H dilemma, is a cognitive reappraisal of it, that is a reformulation of the meaning of the situation (Miu & Crişan, 2011). For instance, a study comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic white warehouse workers in the United States showed that Hispanic workers were more satisfied with their jobs, although the jobs were identical for both groups (Hoppe et al., 2010). The authors interpret this difference such that Hispanic workers lowered their expectations towards their jobs and their status in society, which influenced their evaluation of decent work (see also Muntaner, 2016). Bruggemann (1974) similarly noted a dynamic interplay between workers' expectations and satisfaction as well as agency depending on the work situation the workers find themselves in (Büssing, 1992). A lowering of expectations could transcend the individual dilemma situation and influence the aspiration level of other job-seekers belonging to the same societal group. For example, Mexican farmworkers in the United States had the impression that only other Mexicans worked in the fields “cause that is all you usually see, Mexican people around” (Salazar et al., 2004, p. 158).

Consequences at the organizational level

Similar to the societal level, consequences at the organizational level unfold at one or several sublevels, for example, the organization, team, and work context. Moreover, the mechanisms that transmit these consequences are also similar to those at the societal level (e.g., disciplinary effect, cognitive reappraisal). We will address in the following consequences that may

contribute to deteriorating employment conditions and economic threats but also consequences that may further increase workplace hazards and health threats.

The E-H dilemma may have *disciplinary effects* that worsen or at least sustain employment conditions (e.g., low pay) and thereby further increase economic threats. Organizations may casualize parts of their workforce (e.g., by terminating their employment with the main organization and subsequently re-employing [some of] them via temporary employment agencies with lower job security and lower pay for the same work), which has disciplinary effects on all workers in the organization (Bourdieu, 1998). Those workers in the temporary employment agency may fear that they will no longer be hired, and the workers who continue to be directly employed by the main organization may now be afraid that they will as well be pushed into the temporary employment agency. Thus, both workforces, that is, the workforce directly employed by the main organization and the workforce employed by the temporary employment agency, are trapped in the E-H dilemma and—similarly to avoidance–avoidance conflicts—may not decide to leave or voice their concerns (Anderson, 2003). Such a fragmentation also reduces the power of collective actions through unions or works councils, which become less able to resist precarious employment and hazardous working conditions (Baron & Pfeffer, 1994; Benach et al., 2007, 2014). Consequently, these conditions do not improve for neither of the two workforces. Birner (2015) describes these mechanisms using the example of the multinational company Amazon.com, Inc., mostly known for offering e-commerce and information technology services, but also for preventing collective action through increasing job insecurity, using subcontractors, or applying other measures depending on the country.

There are several other aspects associated with the E-H dilemma that may further increase workplace hazards and thereby health threats. First, *competition* among workers and among organizations that is essential for neoliberalism (e.g., Bal & Dóci, 2018; Benach et al., 2014; Roelofs et al., 2011) and norms (e.g., of masculinity in high-risk occupations; Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015) may increase risky behavior and work pace, which in turn raises the risk of hazards. Second, the combination of health threats and precarious employment, which are the main components of the E-H dilemma, fosters *high turnover rates*. Thus, organizations recruit more marginalized groups, such as Hispanic immigrants in meat production (Kandel & Parrado, 2005) or de-skilled workers (Ritzer, 2021). These groups, as outlined previously, may demand even less resources (due to lower expectations) to protect themselves against hazards. Third, *low unionization* also limits possibilities to voice concerns about hazards and needs for protective clothing and equipment (e.g., Amick et al., 2015). Research conducted in agriculture and horticulture shows that workers rarely speak up about hazards to their supervisors but instead accept these hazards because they are afraid of being replaced (by losing their employment or by being refused a prolongation of their temporary employment). Consequentially, supervisors are not urged to install protective measures (Bamford, 2015; Salazar et al., 2004).

Consequences at the individual level

Consequences at the individual level may affect the individual worker but also their direct social environment (e.g., family). To the affected individual worker, the E-H dilemma may seem like a contradiction the worker must solve themselves although most of the causes can be found in dominant frameworks set by political and economic ideologies (McDonald &

Bubna-Litic, 2012). Indeed, as capitalist economies rely on a large number of workers who work in unattractive jobs, there is little interest from the capital side to provide solutions for the dilemma they place workers in. Instead, modern capitalist organizations and societies push notions of individualism and myths of freedom, meritocracy, and social Darwinism to make workers believe that their position in society and their limited job options are the result of a natural social order (see also Bal & Dóci, 2018; Jost et al., 2003; van Dijk et al., 2020). These workers may adopt this narrative (e.g., blame themselves for not finishing school; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012) but also pay the costs of these myths, which are reinforced by the disciplinary mechanism of the E-H dilemma. Thus, consequences at the individual level include economic hardship and deteriorating physical and mental health (see also Szaflarski & Vaughn, 2015).

Becoming entrapped in *economic hardship* (e.g., having trouble paying bills, rent, and medical care) can be explained by the short- and long-term effects of the E-H dilemma and its components, i.e., economic and health threats. For those who live under constant economic pressure, such as primary bread-winners who have to pay off debts (e.g., Federici, 2014), rent, food, and so forth, the immediate economic threat of job loss leads them to invest increased levels of effort, time, and energy in their job (e.g., Brockner et al., 1992; as long as a job loss is not inevitable). As a result, workers have less time and energy to spend on education or other activities (e.g., job search), which could enhance their chances of finding alternative work with greater job security (alleviating immediate economic threats) and less hazards (alleviating immediate health threats, which might result in an economic threat of not being able to work in this job any longer) in the long run. For example, research has found that adolescent migrant farmworkers report to be too exhausted to attend night school after working long hours (Salazar et al., 2004). Another consequence of investing more time and energy into one's job as a reaction to the immediate economic threat of job loss can be that workers have less time and energy available to spend on social relationships. Social relationships, however, may provide workers with resources that diminish the E-H dilemma (e.g., emotional, instrumental, or financial support). Through these effects, workers already in the E-H dilemma become even more entrapped in the E-H dilemma in the long run.

The *health consequences* of the E-H dilemma can go beyond the specific physical health threat posed by workplace hazards (e.g., skin contamination). As a consequence of the unsolvable nature of the E-H dilemma, workers may ruminate about the dilemma, its components, and potential solutions. Rumination has been shown to impede executive functions (Cropley & Collis, 2020), that is the cognitive processes that allow concentrating or focusing on activities (Diamond, 2013), which might be essential for preventing injuries (Namian et al., 2018). Also, rumination may foster depressive symptoms via irritation (Klinger, 1975; Müller et al., 2004). Additionally, the antecedents of the E-H dilemma may impede health. For example, precarious employment makes it difficult to construct a career narrative and a life plan, which is essential for happiness and subjective well-being (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Thus, the consequences of the E-H dilemma on health might go beyond the immediate discomfort involved in experiencing an avoidance-avoidance conflict (Anderson, 2003). The solutions that organizations offer include stress management and well-being programs (e.g., mindfulness meditation), which are supposed to provide workers with individual measures to reduce stress. Whereas these programs are helpful in the short term, they shift the responsibility for stress management to the individual worker and psychologise problems like the E-H dilemma, as opposed to tackling the systematic sources of the E-H dilemma at the organizational and societal level (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Walsh, 2018).

IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, we proposed that the current focus in large parts of WOP on people with the privilege to choose between several (attractive) job options and on their self-actualization needs, instead of taking into account people with fewer options and their struggle to satisfy their basic physiological and safety needs (e.g., food, housing, job security), is short-sighted and limited. We caution against the risk of losing out on important psychological insights and endangering WOP's legitimacy in the long run.

Examining the full spectrum of job choice situations in WOP research

By drawing attention to the E-H dilemma, we shed light on the full spectrum of job choice situations that people experience. At the upper end of the spectrum are those typically studied whose job choice includes several attractive options; in the middle are those whose job choice entails choosing between some acceptable options; and at the lower end are those whose limited choices consist of rather unattractive options such as precarious jobs, hazardous jobs, or unemployment. In doing so, we want to encourage WOP researchers to also consider the medium and restricted choice situations.

If people who are restricted in their job choice are excluded from research, WOP risks losing out on insights in the decision-making mechanisms these people apply and the reasons they consider when making these decisions (see also Duffy et al., 2016). Compared with the commonly examined decision between several attractive job options (representing an *approach-approach conflict*), some people might only have the choice between a hazardous job and unemployment (e.g., Salazar et al., 2004), constituting an E-H dilemma, which represents an *avoidance-avoidance conflict* (Lewin, 1935). Basic psychological research suggests that decision-making processes differ considerably between different types of decision conflicts (e.g., Diederich, 2003). Applying job choice theories and models that have been developed based on data from approach-approach conflicts (e.g., Soelberg's Job Search and Choice Model; see the review by Power & Aldag, 1985) for people whose situation in-fact constitutes avoidance-avoidance conflicts will lead to false predictions and conclusions.

Doing WOP research for the whole society

In addition, we see a risk that WOP researchers do not adequately represent the needs of all people when their focus is on self-actualization needs in their theorizing. In WOP's defense, variables like personal development and growth fall more neatly into traditional psychological theories. Nevertheless, for those who cannot afford basic living costs, this focus (i.e., on self-actualization needs) is not of primary concern.⁴ In 2018, 42% of U.S. households could not afford basic living costs (United for ALICE, 2020). This misrepresentation may fuel skepticism towards WOP and cast doubts regarding its legitimacy to represent society (especially that of publicly financed research institutes; Azar, 2010; Rad et al., 2018). Representing only the other 58%, whose jobs sufficiently satisfy basic physiological and safety needs, might obscure the effects of neoliberalism (e.g., on equality) as for these people freedom of job choice might not be myths (Bal & Dóci, 2018). WOP researchers might come to take these myths for granted if research and teaching almost exclusively focus on those segments of the population that are relatively privileged.

Taking a broader perspective on the employment-health dilemma

As we have proposed so far, the E-H dilemma describes having to choose between accepting/keeping a hazardous job to avoid economic threats (*choosing employment*) and rejecting/quitting a hazardous job to avoid health threats (*choosing health*). We proposed that people belonging to marginalized groups, for example, due to their gender, ethnicity, and social class, are more likely to face this dilemma, as resources (e.g., education, personal networks) that provide access to jobs, or at least attractive jobs, are unequally distributed and therefore place greater restraints on marginalized groups when it comes to job choices (Blustein, 2013; Jamil et al., 2012; Owens, 2018). Moreover, we gave examples of certain industries, such as food processing (Kandel & Parrado, 2005), construction work (Roelofs et al., 2011), agriculture (Salazar et al., 2004), and horticulture (Bamford, 2015), and contract and employment constellations, such as the gig economy or temporary employment agencies (Howard, 2017), that may be especially prone to have their workers face the E-H dilemma.

We also propose that people who would not typically view themselves as belonging to marginalized groups and do not work in the mentioned industries or employment constellations may find themselves in situations where they face restrictions in their job choice and experience economic threats. At the *societal level*, crises such as the COVID crisis – where due to infection control measures entire industries, like the tourism, gastronomy, or leisure sector, were closed down for several months and their order situation recovered only slowly – had people with previously a highly sought-for education (e.g., chefs, pilots, travel agents) suddenly unable to work in their jobs and earn a living with it (International Labour Organization, 2021). Similarly, at the *organizational level*, company bankruptcy or organization-wide changes in strategy (e.g., withdrawing from regional markets) or technology (e.g., turning away from combustion to electric engines) might similarly confront people with sudden unemployment and render their education worthless (e.g., Dixon et al., 2019). Also at the *individual level*, sudden changes in their life, like illness or death of family members or divorces, can constrain people in their job choice by limiting them to certain working hours and workplaces nearby, for example (Richardson, 2012).

On the health threat side of the equation, we see the E-H dilemma not limited to the more obvious physical, chemical, biological, and ergonomic hazards. In line with Benach et al. (2014), we would like to stress also the psychosocial hazards that workplaces can entail. These can be, for example, abusive supervision (Zhang & Liao, 2015), bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), sexual harassment (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009), or customer incivility (Sommovigo et al., 2019) that workers in all kinds of jobs and occupations may face and that can severely threaten their health. Breevaart et al. (2021) outline for the example of abusive supervision how societal-, organizational-, and individual-level factors contribute to workers being trapped in such health-threatening work situations. Considering the variety of occupations, contexts, and groups that can be afflicted by health and economic threats, we believe that the E-H dilemma serves as a useful framework for conducting research across the broader WOP field.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach

We presume that complex, work-related questions like the E-H dilemma require expertise from multiple disciplines. Based on the two main aspects of the E-H dilemma – health and economic threats, we expect collaborations with the following disciplines to be particularly fruitful: To

address inequalities in access to education and jobs, WOP researchers should collaborate with experts from, for example, economics, sociology, educational research, and gender studies. To address workplace hazards, they should collaborate with experts from, for example, occupational safety, ergonomics, and human factors. In such multidisciplinary collaborations, WOP researchers themselves may examine the core psychological stressors and consequences that are related to these inequalities and hazards.

Following a critical perspective (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; see also Prilleltensky & Stead, 2013), researchers from WOP and other disciplines should also examine strategies that can solve the E-H dilemma and resources that can reduce consequences and stressors (e.g., supervisor support; Heaney & Hoppe, 2017). These strategies should focus primarily on the societal and organizational level because most of the antecedents are located in these realms. Individual-level strategies might provide a fast way out (e.g., quitting a hazardous job) but entail high risks for the people to whom we refer to in this paper (i.e., precarious workers, marginalized groups; Heslin et al., 2012; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Thus, WOP and other disciplines should develop strategies, like interventions, that go beyond the individual level.

Bringing theory and practice into greater alignment

Finally, the E-H dilemma can inform interventions at the three levels where it is rooted and vice versa. At the *societal level*, WOP researchers should co-operate with societal and political actors such as unions, worker representatives, activists, and political institutions (e.g., policy makers) that advocate for the interests of workers in precarious employment and hazardous jobs and/or marginalized groups (e.g., the European Trade Union Confederation, 4 hours league, LabourNet). In these co-operations, WOP researchers may learn more about workers' needs and use their expertise and social status to support them. Communicating relevant research findings back to society can encourage policy makers and management to pay more attention to the antecedents of the E-H dilemma as well as to engage in solutions. These co-operations should not aim at moving marginalized groups up and down the hierarchy of inclusion and exclusion but aim at policies that include everyone (see also MacLachlan, 2015).

At the *organizational level*, WOP researchers may provide their expertise, e.g., regarding psychological risk assessment (e.g., Dollard et al., 2007). In addition, conducting research in and with companies in a collaborative manner could work towards identifying existing strategies to address the antecedents of the E-H dilemma or solutions to deal with its consequences. More specifically, research should inform organizations about the possibilities of improving employment and working conditions. A major challenge in addressing hazards and precariousness at the organizational level is that many workers who are affected by the E-H dilemma are outsourced. This challenge is underlined by studies on hospital workers which neglect outsourced ancillary workers (Wee et al., 2020 criticizing Suárez-García et al., 2020). Therefore, WOP researchers who work with organizations that largely rely on such casualization practices should demand access to these subsidiaries and try to encourage organizations to improve employment and working conditions for workers, including those in subsidiaries.

At the *individual level*, WOP researchers can support workers in developing greater agency and addressing precarious employment and the health hazards that typically compliment them. To do that WOP researchers must be accessible to workers affected by the E-H dilemma. This might happen, for instance, in legal advice sessions that sociopolitical organizations sometimes offer for migrant workers, precarious workers, or unemployed (e.g., BASTA!; Tattarini, 2018).

One option for addressing these issues is for WOP researchers to conduct participatory action research (Brydon-Miller, 2015) with attendants of these sessions. Participatory action research supports individuals in identifying and addressing issues, designing and conducting research on those issues, critically analyzing their findings, resolving social problems that affect them, addressing the policies that affect them, and reflecting on the results (Newman Phillips et al., 2010). Through this approach the participants can understand what conditions (e.g., economic, social, and political) influence their situation and develop agency to address these issues (Brydon-Miller, 2015; see also Freire, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Taken together, our work contributes to developing a critical perspective in WOP by highlighting the various inequalities involved in job choice. Large parts of the traditional WOP literature tend to focus on people with the privilege of choice between several attractive offers (e.g., Blustein et al., 2008; Richardson, 2012), implying an approach-approach conflict (Lewin, 1935). With our work, we join calls to include people with “less-than-optimal levels of choice” (Blustein et al., 2008; Blustein, 2013, p. 5; Richardson, 2012; Swanson, 2013; Turner et al., 2014). In this way, we hope to encourage WOP researchers to examine the full spectrum of job choice situations, to represent more people with WOP research, to challenge neoliberal myths such as freedom of job choice (Bal & Dóci, 2018), and to inspire multidisciplinary collaborations. We hope our proposed conceptualization of the E-H dilemma helps to entangle the different antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences involved and provide a framework for scholars in WOP but also sociology, public health, and other social sciences to help people deal with such situations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We received funding (grant number: P-2020-423-4) from the Hans-Böckler Foundation, Düsseldorf, Germany, that funds work-related research on behalf of the DGB (the Confederation of German Trade Unions).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper is a conceptual paper, which does not make use of any data.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We acknowledge that this may not be the case for employment-relationships in low- or middle-income countries because they did not benefit from this boom (Muntaner, 2016).

² We are aware that education is determined by social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) acting at the societal level (e.g., Owens, 2018). However, we decided to place education at the individual level because it unfolds its effect on the E-H dilemma here.

- ³ This mechanism echoes the mechanism we described at the organizational level saying that organizations make targeted investments in working conditions to attract and retain workers/applicants with sought-after qualifications. The difference between this organizational-level mechanism and the individual-level mechanism described here is that people themselves negotiate their individual conditions based on their individual bargaining power.
- ⁴ Note that we do not intend to say that these aspects do not play any role for less advantaged people (see also Dik & Duffy, 2009). However, we want to emphasize that other aspects that WOP does not focus on might be more, or at least equally important.

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How to cite this article: Kößler, F. J., Wesche, J. S., & Hoppe, A. (2023). In a no-win situation: The employment–health dilemma. *Applied Psychology*, 72(1), 64–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12393>