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### **What Makes You Proactive Can Burn You Out:**

#### **The Downside of Proactive Skill Building Motivated by Financial Precarity and Fear**

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### **Abstract**

Proactivity at work is generally assumed to be preceded by positive motivational states with positive outcomes for employees. However, recent perspectives suggest downsides to proactive behavior, including that it can be driven by negative emotions or experienced as depleting for employees. Bringing these previously disconnected ideas together, we utilize cognitive-motivational-relational and self-determination theories to holistically examine the negative antecedents of proactivity and its outcomes. We argue that employees, particularly those with high impression management motives, experience burnout when financial precarity and fear drive them to proactively learn new skills. We test and show support for these hypotheses in a four-wave study of 1,315 university employees during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, an external event that threatened employees' financial security. Theoretically, our findings broaden our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of proactivity, while expanding the role of fear at work beyond "flight" responses to include motivating protective effort. Practically, our findings help to understand both how employees proactively develop their skills in light of financial precarity and how these proactive efforts are experienced as depleting.

*Keywords:* Proactivity, proactive skill building, fear, discrete emotions, impression management motives

## **What Makes You Proactive Can Burn You Out: The Downside of Proactive Skill Building Motivated by Financial Precarity and Fear**

Proactivity, or behavior that is self-starting, future-focused, and change-oriented (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2006), has attracted increasing attention in recent years, with a rapid growth in the number of articles on the topic (e.g., Parker & Bindl, 2016). Two prominent assumptions classify proactivity as a “positive” behavior. First, proactivity scholars have traditionally presumed, and shown, that positive motivational states such as positive affect and intrinsic motivation fuel employee’s proactive work efforts (Parker et al., 2010). Positive affect promotes exploration, setting challenging goals, and a willingness to tolerate losses, all of which are important for proactive behavior (Cangiano et al., 2016). For its part, intrinsic motivation involves a sense of autonomy and enjoyment that fuels self-starting behaviors (Strauss & Parker 2014). Second, research has generally focused on how proactivity enhances important work outcomes, such as work performance and career success (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Thomas et al., 2010). For example, longitudinal research demonstrates that proactivity is positively related to employees’ salary growth and promotions received (Seibert et al., 2001).

However, these dominant assumptions are being challenged. First, there is increasing recognition that negative motivational states can fuel proactivity, with some suggesting that negative emotions energize employees to proactively cope with work-related challenges (Bindl, 2019; Lebel, 2016). For example, Lebel (2017) theorized that fear can increase employees’ efforts to protect themselves by proactively minimizing harm. From this perspective, negative emotions, such as fear, motivate employees to actively adapt by signaling that the current situation should be changed (Elfenbein, 2007; George, 2011). Thus, negative emotions likely shape proactivity via different processes than do positive emotions. Second, a nascent body of

research suggests proactivity may sometimes have negative consequences, with employees experiencing proactive behavior as depleting (Bolino, Turnley, & Anderson, 2016). Proactivity can drain employee resources and foster feelings of burnout (Bolino, Valcea, & Harvey, 2010), especially when accompanied with extrinsically regulated motivation (Strauss et al., 2017). These two emerging sets of research might be linked, as the initial negative states fueling proactivity may also produce feelings of burnout. Yet, research examining negative emotions as antecedents to proactivity has not theoretically linked nor empirically examined the potentially negative consequences of the resulting proactive action.

We utilize Lazarus' (1991) cognitive-motivational-relational theory to explain how negative motivational states both spur proactivity *and* produce downstream negative consequences for employees. This theory helps explain how events characterized by high financial uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can induce strong negative emotions which motivate employees to handle challenges (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Frijda, 1986). Following this, we argue that financial precarity creates feelings of fear, which motivates employees to proactively protect themselves by building job-related skills. We then integrate cognitive-motivational-relational theory with self-determination theory (Gagné & Deci, 2005) to identify why and for whom the proactivity stimulated by financial precarity can be depleting, resulting in burnout. Self-determination theory recognizes that motivational goals can sometimes be externally regulated and require extra levels of self-control in their pursuit. Consequently, we theorize that proactive skill building will be especially linked with burnout for those with strong impression management motives, because protecting one's image (an external goal) exacerbates the cognitive burden on employees, requiring even more effort and self-regulation. Taken together, we propose the moderated serial mediation model shown in Figure 1. We test our

hypotheses with a 4-wave survey in a sample of 1,315 staff employees at a large university during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many employees struggled with financial demands.

We make several theoretical contributions in this research. First, we take a holistic approach to examine both the negative antecedents of proactivity *and* its outcomes, rather than one or the other as in previous research. Proactivity research would be incomplete without considering the possibility that fear-driven proactivity might come with negative consequences. Thus, we contribute by highlighting the negative implications of fear-driven proactivity and suggesting that future theoretical models would benefit from *jointly* considering the antecedents and consequences of proactivity. Second, we expand understanding of the consequences of feeling afraid at work. Whereas previous research has generally assumed that fear leads employees to seek safety by avoiding or withdrawing from the situation (Kiewitz et al., 2016; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009), we demonstrate that fear can motivate self-protective behavior of actively engaging with the situation. This expands fear's role beyond "flight" responses to include motivating protective effort to keep oneself safe from harm. Third, we move beyond main effect arguments (e.g., Bolino, Turnley, et al., 2010) to identify a key contingency—impression management motives—of the proactivity-burnout relationship. Doing so contributes by specifying which forms of motivation increase the likelihood that proactivity harms employee well-being. Altogether, the totality of our model paints a more complete picture of proactivity with practical implications for how employees actively respond to financial precarity.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

We apply cognitive-motivational-relational theory (Lazarus, 1991) to link the negative motivational antecedents of proactivity to its potential negative outcomes. There are three core tenets to this theory, which describes: how perceptions of external events elicit emotional

reactions; how emotions motivate behaviors to cope with the situation; and ultimately how coping behaviors influence individual well-being. First, specific emotions—referred to as discrete—arise from how employees subjectively experience environmental factors such as challenges, demands, and threats (Frijda, 1986). Discrete emotions are elicited based on how people cognitively appraise a situation (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Roseman et al., 1990). Second, emotions play a mediating role linking employee perceptions of external events to coping behavior. Each discrete emotion motivates behavioral responses based upon its unique action tendency, such as moving against another in anger and protecting the self in fear (Frijda et al., 1989; Roseman et al., 1994). Third, coping behaviors have important outcomes in terms of individual subjective and physiological well-being (Lazarus, 1991). That is, how a person copes with external events determines whether their well-being improves or deteriorates. We apply each of these tenets in more detail below.

### **Negative Motivational States as Antecedents to Proactivity**

Cognitive-motivational-relational theory (henceforth CMR theory) provides a means to understand how people's perceptions of external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic create negative emotional responses that can spark proactivity. CMR theory states that emotional experiences are shaped by environmental events that "include demands, resources, and constraints with which a person must deal" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 87). During the COVID-19 pandemic, an environmental event that formed the context of our research, numerous economic and job-related challenges became highly salient and pronounced (Kniffin et al., 2020). COVID-19 produced uncertainty about not only one's physical health, but also one's material well-being, with many wondering whether they would have enough money to pay their bills (Calfas, 2021). In our sample, many staff qualitatively reported financial pressures due to university-wide pay

and hiring freezes, with perceived difficulties about paying bills and rising costs. Accordingly, we focus here on financial precarity, defined as “the perception that one does not have sufficient financial resources to meet one’s needs” (Meuris & Leana, 2018, p. 401). Perceptions of financial precarity reflect an employee’s broad assessment of the financial demands and constraints they face at a given time (Meuris & Leana, 2018).

According to CMR theory, a person’s perceptions during an external event determine the emotions they experience (Frijda, 1986; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Following this, we argue that high levels of financial precarity elicit fear in employees. By definition, fear arises from uncertainty and perceived threats to the self (Öhman, 2008; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985); it is the primary emotion elicited when people perceive actual or potential harm (LeDoux, 2015). While fear and anxiety both arise from uncertain events and potential personal harm, people experience fear when there is an identifiable threat, and experience anxiety when the threat is more diffuse or indeterminate (Frijda, 1986; Öhman, 2008). Moreover, fear arises from tangible and immediate harm, whereas anxiety results from distant threats (Lazarus, 1991; Rachman, 1990). Thus, while both fear and anxiety arise from uncertain events, people experience fear when they can label and recognize a clear threat to their material well-being (Frijda, 1986; Rachman, 1990).

Accordingly, we argue that financial precarity—e.g., the possibility that one cannot pay the bills—is a clearly identifiable threat likely to result in fear. Financial precarity arises because people believe that their financial stability is or could be harmed (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Meuris & Leana, 2015), such as when one believes they have insufficient material resources to meet their needs (Meuris & Leana, 2018). When employees are overwhelmed by their financial obligations, the perceived threat to their material well-being they feel likely elicits fear. As the primary emotion resulting from uncertainty and threat (LeDoux, 2015), fear is also more likely to

arise from financial precarity than other negative emotions. For example, there is evidence that employees reported higher levels of fear relative to anger during the COVID-19 crisis (Slaughter et al., 2021). In summary, we argue that relative to anxiety or anger, fear is the most likely discrete negative emotion arising from financial precarity.

### ***How Financial Precarity and Fear Motivate Proactive Skill Building***

According to CMR theory, emotions link perceptions of external events to behaviors for coping with the situation (Lazarus, 1991). Following a discrete emotional approach, this theory posits that each emotion accompanies a unique action tendency (Roseman et al., 1994; Shaver et al., 1987). Action tendencies are impulses to engage or disengage with the environment to achieve a goal, such as to move against something in anger (Frijda et al., 1989). The notion of an action tendency is conceptually useful here because it explains how emotions motivate employees to cope with challenges from external events (Frijda, 1986; Parrott, 2001). Action tendencies “activate and prioritize our behaviors, signaling that we need to respond or no longer need to respond to aspects of the environment” (Elfenbein, 2007, p. 346). Fear’s action tendency is to seek safety from threat (Frijda, 1986; Roseman, 2011), and can manifest in a variety of forms, including flight, freezing, increased attention, and defensive effort, depending on the challenge a person faces (Izard & Ackerman, 2000; Öhman, 2008). As such, fear’s action tendency is more specific to the situation than is anxiety’s, which involves only “avoidance or escape, as the circumstances it arises from are ambiguous, ongoing, and have no clear way out” (Fu et al., 2021, p. 48).

Based on the notion that fear can increase defensive effort, Lebel (2017) theorized that rather than withdraw, employees may proactively change the situation to protect themselves from threat. Proactivity is defined as “employees’ self-initiated efforts to bring about future-



focused changes” (Cai et al., 2019, p. 209; Parker & Collins, 2010). Proactive behaviors are thus active, anticipatory efforts intended to change oneself or the organization (Grant & Ashford, 2008). The change-oriented nature of proactivity allows employees to protect themselves from unsatisfactory situations, especially when they cannot withdraw (Lebel, 2017). When employees associate inaction with negative outcomes, such as lowered task performance because of failing to meet changing job demands, they may take protective action instead (Delgado et al., 2009). Supporting this, Lebel (2016) found that employees fearing external threat during an economic downturn were motivated to speak up, presumably to protect themselves and the organization. In summary, growing evidence shows that fear’s action tendency to protect the self from threat can manifest in a range of behaviors at work, including proactivity.

Elaborating on these arguments, we argue that fear’s protective action tendency can motivate employees who are feeling financial precarity to proactively build skills, defined as taking initiative to master the various tasks of their occupation (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, job insecurity and changing job demands made people worry about their finances (Romm & Bogage, 2020). Withdrawing from work was an infeasible coping strategy for those nervous about paying their bills, as reducing effort could increase the likelihood of losing one’s job. Instead, employees feeling afraid could learn new job skills as one way to protect themselves from the threat of financial insecurity. Indeed, Sharma and colleagues (2021) suggest that proactively building skills equips employees with the resources to cope with changing work demands. In this way, skill building is a form of proactive coping (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), with employees engaging in future-focused behavior to minimize the impact of stressful events (Oh & Farh, 2017). In the context of increased remote work during the pandemic, some employees might go beyond mandated requirements to

proactively learn multiple communication systems (e.g., Zoom, MS Teams, WebEx). Doing so could help reassure employees of their continued employment in the face of precarity. In summary, we predict that fear can act as a mediating mechanism explaining how financial precarity motivates proactive efforts to address threats to one's financial well-being.

*Hypothesis 1: Financial precarity has a positive indirect effect on proactive skill building via fear.*

### **The Consequences of Proactivity Motivated by Negative Motivational States**

#### ***Financial Precarity, Fear, Proactive Skill Building, and Burnout***

CMR theory not only explains people's emotional and behavioral responses to external events, but also how certain coping behaviors influence people's well-being. Relevant here is the notion that people continue to feel emotions as they are exposed to a chronic threat (Lazarus, 1991). While discrete emotions such as fear are relatively short in duration (Barsade & Gibson, 2007), these emotions can reoccur as a stimulus remains present (Folkman et al., 1986). For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic dragged on, people likely experienced continued uncertainty about their finances and experienced several instances of fear. Since coping is a dynamic process, and exposure to chronic demands produces continued attempts to address the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985), we argue that people perceiving a continued threat to their finances during the pandemic would frequently feel fear and make sustained attempts to cope. In other words, to the extent that people perceived precarity and thus fear during the pandemic, they would also likely exhibit high levels of skill building as a means of coping at work.

Proactivity scholars increasingly recognize that one negative consequence of proactivity is that it can fatigue employees (Bolino, Valcea, & Harvey, 2010). As an anticipatory and discretionary behavior, proactive behavior requires the expenditure of energy, which can drain

employees as they attempt to self-regulate, learn new skills, or take on additional responsibilities at work (Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Sonnentag, 2003). Proactive coping requires attention and effort that consumes resources that could otherwise be used on other tasks (Shoss, 2017). Being proactive thus expends one's stock of resources, which can strain employees if those resources are not restored (Bolino, Valcea, & Harvey, 2010). Feeling fatigued from expending psychological and physical resources reflects a sense of emotional exhaustion characteristic of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

We argue here that the perceived precarity and fear that produces proactivity can also produce burnout. While financial precarity narrows a person's attention to focus on immediate threats and address their financial situation (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013), it simultaneously reduces employees' resources to complete tasks outside of their immediate focus (Meuris & Leana, 2015). Financial precarity creates a "tunneling" effect that reduces cognitive bandwidth and exhausts employees' resources over time (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Similarly, fear is a high intensity negative emotion that narrows one's attention to focus on a threat, depleting energy to execute other tasks (LeDoux, 2015). Thus, financial precarity and fear are likely to motivate behavior that can drain employee's resources at work. When this motive spurs employees to proactively protect themselves, they are doing so because they have to, more so than because they want to. Proactivity stimulated by a sense of pressure is generally experienced as depleting by employees (Bolino, Turnley, et al., 2010). Therefore, we argue that sustained effort to proactively build skills because of financial precarity and fear is likely to drain an employee's resources and create feelings of burnout. The result is a serially mediated relationship between financial precarity and burnout via fear and proactivity.

*Hypothesis 2: Financial precarity has a serial indirect effect on burnout via fear and proactive skill building.*

### ***Impression Management Motives as a Moderator***

Having established that proactivity may lead to burnout, we now make predictions about for *whom* the proactivity-burnout relationship will be strongest. CMR theory states that a person's motivational goals determine how that person copes with threats over time (Lazarus, 1993). One's relatively stable motivational tendency—the desires and goals a person generally finds most important—can interact with a situation to influence whether a person's coping attempts improve or impair their well-being (Lazarus, 1991). Thus, people with different motivational goals may respond differently to the same situation, resulting in either enhanced or harmed well-being. Following this, we argue that some employees are more likely than others to feel burnt out from their proactive skill building efforts during the pandemic.

On its own, CMR theory is insufficient to explain which form of motivation is more likely than others to increase burnout due to proactive behavior. Here, self-determination theory dovetails nicely with CMR theory to provide further explanation for when proactivity is most likely to harm employee well-being. According to self-determination theory, motivation falls along a continuum from autonomous (intrinsically regulated) to controlled (externally regulated) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When employees are relatively more driven by autonomous forms of motivation, they act based on a sense of free choice and interest, whereas employees relatively more compelled by controlled forms of motivation act based on a sense of pressure and obligation, seeking external rewards such as approval or pay (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Impression management motives, defined as the desire to create, change, or maintain a particular image in the mind of others (Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016; Yun et al., 2007), make obtaining socially desirable rewards particularly salient for employees. When impression management motives are high, one's behavior is primarily influenced by aspects external to the person, similar to controlled motivational states (Gagné et al., 2015). Employees with high levels of impression management motives focus on achieving social outcomes that provide them some benefit or reduce some risk of harm, such as garnering a positive reputation (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997) or avoiding unfavorable impressions such as negative performance evaluations (Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016). Seeking to garner a positive reputation or avoid a negative one, impression management motives compel employees to find ways for their extra efforts at work to be visible and recognized by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

We argue that employees who have high levels of impression management motives are more likely to experience burnout from their proactive efforts at work. Proactivity is an energy-intensive behavior that may require employees with high impression management motives to expend additional resources to convey the image they desire. This is because acting based on externally controlled motives requires additional effort and self-control, depleting one's resources (Muraven et al., 2007). Based on this, Strauss and Parker (2014, p. 56) argued that proactivity combined with controlled forms of motivation is "likely to result in greater resource depletion, and will be ... potentially detrimental to individuals' well-being." Consider the example of proactively developing new skills when working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic: employees with high levels of impression management motives would be concerned that no one would notice their proactivity in a remote work environment. Thus, when impression management motives are high, the relationship between proactivity and burnout is especially

strong because employees feel additional pressure to ensure their proactive efforts are recognized. In contrast, employees with low impression management motives would be less concerned about being recognized for their proactivity. Therefore, for employees with low impression management motives, proactivity is less likely to be experienced as depleting, because they would not be as focused on making additional efforts to be noticed while working remotely. Thus, proactive employees with impression management motives will likely be more depleted compared to those employees who are proactive yet less concerned about how they are perceived, such as those motivated by more autonomous reasons, including learning for the sake of learning (Grant et al., 2011; Strauss et al., 2017).

*Hypothesis 3: Impression management motives moderate the relationship between proactive skill building and burnout such that the relationship is stronger for employees with higher (versus lower) levels of impression management motives.*

Overall, combining CMR and self-determination theories, we propose that the relationship between financial precarity and burnout, via fear and proactivity, will be stronger for employees with higher (versus lower) impression management motives. While CMR theory suggests that financial precarity and fear create pressure on employees to proactively protect themselves, self-determination theory suggests that those with high impression management motives feel additional pressure to ensure that their proactive efforts are recognized. The combination of self-protective motives resulting from financial precarity and fear and the additional pressure to protect one's image will be especially depleting for employees engaging in proactivity. Taken together, we argue financial precarity will have a stronger indirect effect on burnout for those with higher impression management motives than those with lower impression management motives.

*Hypothesis 4: Impression management motives will moderate the serially mediated relationship between financial precarity and burnout through fear and proactive skill building such that the serially mediated relationship is stronger for employees with higher (versus lower) levels of impression management motives.*

## **Method**

### **Transparency and Openness**

Following the *Journal of Applied Psychology* methodological checklist, we describe our sampling plan, data exclusions, and measures below. The analysis code is available in the [online repository](#). Data are not available due to the confidentiality and legal concerns of our site sponsors. This study's design and its analysis were not preregistered. Data were analyzed using Mplus, version 8.5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

### **Participants and Procedure**

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a four-wave study of staff employees working at least 20 hours per week at a large university in the United States (IRB# STUDY20050003, University of Pittsburgh, "Adaptability at Work"). We collected data early in the COVID-19 pandemic because it was an emotion-provoking external event significantly impacting people's financial well-being and daily work routines (Kniffin et al., 2020). As such, the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to examine the relationships in our theoretical model. The first three waves of data were collected from May to July 2020, shortly after the university moved classes online and asked most employees to work from home. We separated the first three surveys by four weeks because this amount of time reduces common method variance (Ostroff et al., 2002). The fourth wave of data was collected approximately five months after Time 3 in December 2020. We chose a 5-month lag to examine the effects of financial precarity over time,

and because our site sponsors asked us to examine burnout at the end of the academic term before all staff went on holiday break.

The university's Human Resources department provided us with a list of email addresses for all non-faculty employees working at each of the main and regional campuses in 43 units (e.g., athletics, facilities management, IT, and support staff). To incentivize participants, we donated \$2 to local food banks for each completed survey; we also entered Time 3 participants into a random drawing to receive one of ten \$50 gift cards. We emailed the Time 1 survey to 7,000 employees, receiving 2,731 responses (a 39% response rate). At Time 2, we received completed surveys from 1,970 participants (a 72% response rate from T1). At Time 3, we received 1,799 responses (a 91% response rate from T2). At Time 4, we received 1,411 responses (a 78% response rate from T3 and an overall effective response rate of 20%). The overall response rate is superior to the response from surveys administered by the Human Resources department at this University (approximately 8-10%). After accounting for missing data, we had 1,318 surveys with complete data at all time points. We further removed three additional responses from employees who indicated they retired during the data collection period. Our final sample was 1,315 employees who completed each of the four surveys (80% female, 89% White, 91% working from home,  $M_{\text{age}} = 45.4$  years)<sup>1</sup>, with 43 of 43 units at the university (100%) represented.

## Measures

The timing for each scale measure corresponded to our theoretical model according to CMR theory; we separated the measures for an employee's perceptions to an external event at T1 (financial precarity), their emotional reaction at T2 (fear), their behavioral response at T3

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<sup>1</sup> Details of non-response bias analysis can be found in Appendix A.



(proactivity), and their well-being at T4 (burnout). Unless otherwise noted, measures were on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*). A full list of our survey items can be found in Appendix B.

**Financial precarity (T1).** Participants reported their perceptions of *financial precarity* at Time 1 using a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) using three items developed by Meuris and Leana (2018). Starting with “over the last month, how often have you...”, an example item is “felt overwhelmed by your financial obligations,”  $\alpha = .93$ .

**Fear (T2).** Because our arguments focus on the frequency of felt emotions over time rather than a single momentary experience of an emotion, participants reported their feelings of *fear* at Time 2 using three items from established measures of long-term (e.g., monthly) affect (Diener et al., 1995; Watson & Clark, 1994). Moreover, given our conceptualization of fear as a discrete emotion, we utilized a measurement approach commonly used by discrete emotion scholars (e.g., Frijda et al., 1989; Shaver et al., 1987). Accordingly, participants reported the extent to which they felt afraid, nervous, and anxious over the last month at work,  $\alpha = .86$ .

**Proactivity (T3).** Participants reported their *proactive skill building* at Time 3 using the three-item scale from Claes and Ruiz-Quintanilla (1998) plus one item developed for this study (“Proactively sought out opportunities to handle challenges on the job”),  $\alpha = .88$ . We chose proactive skill building as our measure of proactivity because of job-related changes during the pandemic (e.g., learning new technologies such as Zoom). Preliminary interviews with HR leadership and staff also indicated that helping employees learn new skills during the pandemic was a top priority for the University. We had employees self-report their proactive behaviors because “employees should certainly be in the best position to report behaviors that involve working from home” (Bolino, Turnley, et al., 2010, p. 842). Moreover, meta-analytic evidence

shows that employees' self-reports better differentiate between proactive behaviors than supervisor reports, suggesting that employees can provide valid ratings of their own proactivity (Tornau & Frese, 2013).

**Burnout (T4).** Employees reported their level of *burnout* at Time 4, five months after Time 3, using the five highest loaders from the emotional exhaustion subscale from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (1981). We chose to measure the emotional exhaustion subscale because of the emotional toll the pandemic had on employees at work (Salari et al., 2020). Starting with "over the last month I have felt," example items include "burned out from my work" and "emotionally drained from my work,"  $\alpha = .93$ .

**Impression management motives (T1).** Employees reported their *impression management motives* at Time 1 using three items from Rioux and Penner (2001) and Yun and colleagues (2007). We measured the moderator in our model at Time 1 because impression management motives can be conceptualized as a relatively stable motivational state (Kristof-Brown et al., 2002). Such a conceptualization also matches our theorizing, as Lazarus (1991) argues that stable motivational tendencies or goal hierarchies (such as impression management motives) influence whether a person's coping attempts increase or decrease their well-being. As such, we purposefully worded the items to reflect participants' motivation at work in general, rather than over the last month as with the other measures listed above. Participants used a 5-point agree/disagree scale on items such as "I am changing my behaviors to create a good impression on others" and "I try to make it look like I am busy to others",  $\alpha = .72$ .

**Controls.** Following recommendations for using controls only when there is a strong theoretical justification (Bernierth & Aguinis, 2016; Spector & Brannick, 2011), we included three key control variables: trait negative affect, COVID-19 worries, and intrinsic motivation. As

described in more detail below, each of these variables is theoretically related to other variables in our model as a confounder. Controlling for confounders “provides an undistorted estimate of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables” (MacKinnon et al., 2000, p. 174). We focus only on these three theoretically relevant variables because methodologists suggest that a ‘purification’ approach that statistically controls for too many factors produces problems such as biased parameter estimates and inferential errors, and makes comparisons across studies more difficult (Becker et al., 2016; Spector & Brannick, 2011).

*Trait negative affect*, which refers to an individual’s disposition to experience negative emotions and have a negative self-concept, increases the likelihood that people respond to threatening situations with fear and stress (Watson & Clark, 1984). Negative affect thus presents a competing theoretical explanation between the variables financial precarity, fear, and burnout. Therefore, we controlled for *trait negative affect* at Time 1 using the 5-item scale from Mackinnon and colleagues (1999),  $\alpha = .86$ , to examine the effect of financial precarity over and above the individual difference of negative affect.

Fear of contracting COVID-19 is an alternative theoretical explanation linking financial precarity, fear, and burnout (Trougakos et al., 2020) because individuals worried about contracting COVID-19 might feel more financial precarity and also more burnout. We measured *COVID-19 worries* at Time 1 using three items created for this study,  $\alpha = .79$ . An example item is, “To what extent are you worried that you might have COVID-19?”

Finally, we controlled for *intrinsic motivation*, because significant theoretical and empirical evidence shows intrinsic motivation to be an antecedent of proactivity (Parker et al., 2010). Including this control allows us to account for relatively more autonomous forms of motivation in shaping proactivity versus the externally regulated forms of motivation described

in the model. Moreover, intrinsic motivation is theoretically and empirically linked to reducing employee burnout (Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; ten Brummelhuis et al., 2011). Employees self-reported their intrinsic motivation at Time 1 using three items from Grant (2008),  $\alpha = .87$ . An example item is, “I am motivated to do my work because I enjoy the work itself.”

### **Analytical Strategy**

To test the hypothesized model shown in Figure 1 and to account for employees being nested within different units at the university, we used multilevel path analysis with Bayesian estimation, rather than maximum likelihood in Mplus 8.5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Although each method has strengths and limitations, “Bayesian analysis facilitates estimation of more complex models, does not rely on normality assumptions, and allows for more straightforward and exact inferences [compared to maximum likelihood]” (Sawyer et al., 2022, p. 249; see also Muthén, 2010; Zyphur & Oswald, 2015). Bayesian estimation was particularly appropriate for our model since we tested serial mediation, which often results in indirect effects that are not normally distributed (Yuan & MacKinnon, 2009). Additionally, the interpretation of the 95% Bayesian credibility intervals is considered more straightforward and meaningful compared to that of the maximum likelihood confidence intervals, as there is “a 95% chance that the credible interval contains the true value of the parameter based on the observed data” (Yuan & MacKinnon, 2009, p. 305).” We grand mean centered the predictor and the moderating variable before creating the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991), which is appropriate when using a Bayesian estimator for a random intercept model like ours (Finch & Bolin, 2017, p. 288; Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The residuals of the outcome variables covaried, as is the default in Mplus. For the controls, we modeled direct effects on both mediators and the outcome variable.

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. Null random coefficient models with no predictors revealed that 2.4% of the variance in proactive skill building resided at the unit level ( $ICC[1] = .024$ ,  $CI [.005, .058]$ ), while a non-significant proportion of the variance in financial precarity ( $ICC[1] = .009$ ,  $CI [-.005, .035]$ ), fear ( $ICC[1] = .015$ ,  $CI [-.001, .044]$ ), and burnout ( $ICC[1] = .004$ ,  $CI [-.009, .028]$ ) resided at the unit level. We thus used a multilevel approach because a significant amount of variance in proactive skill building is explained at the unit level. Given the nonindependence of the data, we conducted multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis in Mplus. The hypothesized model with all the measured variables, including controls, fit the data well,  $\chi^2(349) = 1810.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $CFI = .94$ ;  $SRMR_{within} = .05$ ;  $RMSEA = .06$ , and provided superior fit to theoretically plausible alternatives, such as a model with financial precarity and fear on one factor,  $\chi^2(356) = 4220.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $CFI = .83$ ;  $SRMR_{within} = .10$ ;  $RMSEA = .09$ ,  $\Delta\chi^2(7) = 1857.12$ ,  $p < .001$ . Other model comparisons are provided in Appendix C.

The results of the multilevel path analyses are reported in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 predicted that financial precarity would have an indirect effect on proactive skill building via fear. We used Markov Chain Monte Carlo estimation in Mplus to test the Bayesian inference regarding the indirect effects, running the analyses with 20,000 iterations, half of which were burn-in iterations. An indirect effect is statistically significant if the Bayesian credibility interval does not include zero. Supporting Hypothesis 1, Table 3 reveals a significant indirect effect of financial precarity on proactive skill building through fear ( $b = .020$ , posterior  $SD = .006$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95%  $CI [.010, .032]$ ). Hypothesis 2 predicted that financial precarity would have a serial indirect effect on burnout via fear and proactive skill building. Supporting this hypothesis, Table 3

reveals a significant indirect effect of financial precarity on burnout via both fear and proactive skill building ( $b = .002$ , posterior  $SD = .001$ ,  $p = .012$ , 95% CI [.000, .003]).

Hypothesis 3 suggested that impression management motives moderate the relationship between proactive skill building and burnout. The results in Table 2 indicate a significant interaction effect of impression management motives and proactive skill building on burnout ( $b = .10$ , posterior  $SD = .03$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI [.035, .167]). As shown in Figure 2, plotting the simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed an interaction in the expected form with a significantly positive relationship between proactive skill building and burnout at higher levels of impression management motives ( $b = .244$ , posterior  $SD = .048$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.148, .335]), and a weaker, non-significant relationship at lower levels of impression management motives ( $b = .043$ , posterior  $SD = .045$ ,  $p = .340$ , 95% CI [-.044, .133]).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that impression management motives would moderate the serially mediated relationship between financial precarity and burnout via fear and proactive skill building, such that the serial indirect effect of perceived precarity would be stronger for those with high impression management motives. Supporting Hypothesis 4, Table 3 reveals that the conditional indirect effect was significant when impression management motives were high ( $b = .003$ , posterior  $SD = .001$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.001, .006]), and not significant when impression management motives were low ( $b = .000$ , posterior  $SD = .001$ ,  $p = .906$ , 95% CI [-.002, .002]).

The difference between the conditional indirect effects was significant ( $b = .003$ , posterior  $SD = .002$ ,  $p = .020$ , 95% CI [.000, .006])<sup>2,3</sup>.

### Exploratory Analyses

While our primary focus is on the downside of proactivity, much proactivity research demonstrates the positive effects of this behavior (Parker et al., 2019). As such, we conducted additional analyses to investigate potential positive outcomes of proactivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an exploratory analysis, we tested whether proactive skill building would positively relate to employees' task adaptivity, understood as the extent to which individuals adapted to changes in their work environment (Griffin et al., 2007). We chose to examine the proactivity – adaptability relationship based on theoretical arguments that proactive coping attempts help employees deal with challenging external events (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Furthermore, we chose task adaptivity as a potential positive outcome because it is a critical

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<sup>2</sup> We ran supplemental analyses with different measures of fear. In the first set of analyses, we removed the “anxious” item from the three-item scale for fear reported above. All of our hypotheses were supported using this two-item measure (afraid, nervous). We ran a second set of analyses using a single-item measure (“anxious”) instead of the three-item scale for fear. All of our hypotheses were supported using this single-item measure. These supplemental analyses suggest that our findings are robust to different combinations of the measure for fear reported above. Please see the [online repository](#) for complete results of analyses with these alternative measures.

<sup>3</sup> Analyses without controls revealed the following results: Hypothesis 1 (indirect effect of financial precarity on proactivity via fear) and Hypothesis 3 (the moderated effect of impression management motives on the relationship between proactivity and burnout) were supported; Hypothesis 2 (serial indirect effect of financial precarity on burnout via fear and proactivity) was not supported, and therefore Hypothesis 4 (the combined moderated serially mediated relationship) could not be supported. We examined this in more detail and found that intrinsic motivation was an empirical confounder. In the methods section above, we argued for including each control because of its theoretical role as a confounder in our model. A confounder is defined as “a variable related to two factors of interest that falsely obscures or accentuates the relationship between them” (Meinert, 1986, p. 285). Inclusion of theoretically relevant confounders in a model is essential because doing so provides an undistorted estimate of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (Aguinis et al., 2021; Atinc et al., 2012; Carlson & Wu, 2012; MacKinnon et al., 2000). As such, the analyses with the controls included are an appropriate test of our hypotheses. Please see the [online repository](#) for the full details of analyses excluding controls.

behavior when employees must cope with uncertainty and major job-related changes (Griffin et al., 2007; Strauss et al., 2015), such as working remotely during the pandemic.

We measured task adaptivity at Time 4 with the 3-item scale from Griffin et al. (2007) to reflect employees' adaptivity to working from home, one of the biggest changes individuals experienced during the pandemic ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). There was a positive correlation between proactive skill building at T3 and adaptability at T4 ( $r = .30$ ), supporting a positive effect of proactivity. We further investigated whether financial precarity and fear would drive this positive association between proactivity and adaptability by including adaptivity as an additional dependent variable in our path analyses. Results revealed a significant indirect effect of financial precarity on task adaptivity via fear and proactive skill building ( $b = .005$ , posterior SD = .001,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.002, .008]). This provides evidence of a potential bright side of financial precarity and fear as drivers of employee proactivity. At the same time, we treat this finding with caution because of a nonsignificant correlation between financial precarity and adaptivity ( $r = .00$ ,  $p = .912$ ) and a negative correlation between fear and adaptivity ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The full results from this analysis are in the [online repository](#). We discuss these exploratory findings in more detail below as an avenue for future research.

### **General Discussion**

Proactive behavior is generally regarded as having positive outcomes, including helping employees deal with uncertainty at work. Indeed, in a four-wave survey study of 1,315 staff employees at a large university, we found evidence that employees proactively coped with financial precarity during the COVID-19 pandemic by building job-related skills. However, we also found evidence for a cost, as this proactive behavior was associated with higher levels of burnout five months later, especially in employees with higher levels of impression management



motives. The totality of our model provides an understanding of how financial precarity and fear can motivate proactivity in the short-term, but also exact a toll on employees' physical well-being in the long run. Below we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our work.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This paper's primary contribution lies in integrating two nascent streams of proactivity research that show that on the one hand negative motivational states can stimulate proactivity, and on the other hand proactivity can have negative outcomes for employees. We use CMR theory (Lazarus, 1991) as a roadmap to link financial precarity to proactivity via feelings of fear. As such, we provide empirical evidence for the notion that fear can motivate proactivity, which has been theorized but not tested (Lebel, 2017). We also extend research on proactivity by not only suggesting that fear motivates this behavior, but also that fear-driven proactivity has negative consequences. The notion that proactivity motivated by negative emotions can have negative consequences for employees has not been considered in the literature. Thus, theoretically linking the antecedents and consequences of proactivity helps expand our understanding of the factors shaping when this behavior may not have positive outcomes (e.g., Parker et al., 2019). In summary, our findings suggest that future research would benefit from jointly considering the antecedents and consequences of proactivity.

Similarly, we contribute by adding important nuance to our understanding of the consequences of feeling afraid at work. Previous theory and research generally assume that fear motivates employees to withdraw or escape from potential harm (e.g., Kiewitz et al., 2016; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Oh & Farh, 2017). Moreover, some emotion theories assume that fear produces avoidant behaviors (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 2011). However, our theory and findings suggest that this perspective is incomplete. Instead, fear should be conceptualized in

terms of its motivational tendency involving *protective* effort, which can manifest in a variety of behaviors beyond withdrawal, flight, or escape (Frijda, 1986). Thus, our findings suggest the motivational core of fear should be broadly conceptualized as protective effort, rather than narrowly as “flight” per se (Lebel, 2017). This conceptualization of fear as involving protective action is also supported by recent research in cognitive neuroscience (see LeDoux, 2015, for a review). In summary, researchers should conceptualize fear in terms of its self-protective nature, rather than narrowly on “flight” or a single behavioral response.

We also contribute to research on proactivity by specifying when this behavior can potentially harm employee well-being. In line with arguments that proactivity can be depleting (e.g., Bolino, Turnley, et al., 2010), we identify burnout as a key negative outcome resulting from proactivity. However, we move beyond proposed main effects (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 2005), integrating CMR and SDT theories to shed light on *for whom* proactive efforts are most depleting. This integration identifies impression management motives as a key contingency of the proactivity-burnout relationship and also expands CMR theory by suggesting which particular *form* of motivation determines whether coping attempts can harm individual well-being. As an overarching theoretical guide, CMR theory broadly suggests that whether a coping behavior harms or improves one’s well-being is contingent on a person’s stable motivational goals, but does not make predictions about which particular goals are relevant in a given situation. We fill that gap here, providing theoretical guidance as to which motivational forces are relevant and suggesting that feeling pressure due to extrinsically regulated motivation can be harmful when employees proactively cope with challenges. Thus, for employees focused on making a good impression, the effort to proactively prevent harm and pressure to be recognized by one’s boss can be particularly depleting.

We also contribute to the literature on financial precarity, wherein scholars primarily suggest that financial precarity reduces proactivity (Meuris & Leana, 2015). In contrast, we find perceived precarity can increase proactivity. One possible explanation for these competing perspectives is different theoretical lenses. Meuris and Leana (2015) argue that financial precarity reduces proactivity because acting in advance and outside of one's job role can be perceived as risky, with those worried about their finances not willing to threaten their job status by challenging existing practices. In contrast, we focus our arguments on energy, suggesting that precarity can focus one's attention on threats and increase effort on specific activities. This focus on energy also helps to explain why feelings of financial precarity can be depleting, as employees proactively and continuously build skills to cope and then become more burned out. In line with self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005), our findings thus support the double-edged effects of financial precarity, with initial positive outcomes in the form of increased effort, but negative consequences for employee well-being as precarity persists.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The current study has both limitations and strengths. We used a multi-wave design, separating variables across four time points during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many employees were concerned about their financial situation. A potential limitation is common method variance from single-source data, which we took steps to reduce by separating the measures over time and varying the response scales (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Because we examined employee's perceptions of their own financial precarity, emotional reactions, and well-being, using self-reported measures was methodologically appropriate. Scholars have argued that self-reports provide more accurate assessments of proactivity, especially when employees are

working from home or developing their own skills (Bolino, Turnley, et al., 2010), matching the context and behavior measured in this sample.

Another limitation is the generalizability of the findings. Although we collected data from a single organization, our sample represented all units at the university on three different campuses and captured a range of distinct jobs and functions. For example, in addition to collecting data from staff supporting faculty in each school at the university, we also collected data from staff supporting the athletic, facilities, human resources, IT, legal, public safety, and student affairs departments. There is also the question of whether our findings generalize beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that our findings will generalize to other external events because we conceptually focused on, and measured, financial precarity and fear rather than narrowly on employee perceptions of the pandemic itself. Moreover, financial precarity can arise from several external forces unrelated to the pandemic, such as economic recessions or automation. In short, because our theoretical model and study design focus on an employee's perceptions of financial precarity and felt fear, our findings are likely to generalize to other negative events that cause these psychological states.

Some of the reported effect sizes in the results are relatively small (e.g., the indirect effect of financial precarity on burnout reported in Table 3 is estimated to be .002). Such a small effect size could be explained by evidence suggesting that relationships between temporally ordered variables (as in serial mediation) tend to be weaker compared to those between concurrent variables (Walters, 2019). Additionally, there is evidence that small effects can be meaningful when the practical importance of the effect size in a specific context is considered (Lance & Vandenberg, 2009; Prentice & Miller, 1992). For example, we observed proactive skill building

at a time when many were impacted by the switch to remote work during COVID-19, thus making even small changes in proactive skill building meaningful.

The findings, strengths, and limitations of our study suggest several avenues for future research. First, it is an open question whether the positive relationship between proactivity and burnout will generalize to other forms of proactivity. However, previous research finds that employees need a substantial amount of energy to engage in other forms of proactivity, such as taking charge (e.g., Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012; Lin et al., 2016). Thus, it is likely that other forms of proactivity will also deplete employees. It is also likely that financial precarity and fear could motivate other forms of proactivity to create protection from threat. For example, seeking feedback can help employees reduce uncertainty during times of change (Griffin & Grote, 2020). Furthermore, whereas we focused our theoretical arguments on how proactivity can drain one's energy (Bolino, Valcea, & Harvey, 2010), other forms of proactivity—such as speaking up and taking charge—could be experienced as draining because of the interpersonal risks that accompany them (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003). Future research may benefit from developing models that integrate different forms of proactivity and theoretical mechanisms (i.e., exhaustion, interpersonal risk) to explain the relationship between proactivity and burnout.

Second, future research should examine the role of gender in shaping the link between fear and proactivity. Psychological research on humans and animals demonstrates that females demonstrate different responses to fear than males, being more likely to adopt affiliative “tend and befriend” than “fight-or-flight” behaviors in response to threat (Taylor, 2006; Taylor et al., 2000). This research suggests that women may respond to feelings of fear by proactively helping others at work, rather than proactively building their own skills. In other words, gender may

shape the intended target of proactivity (Grant & Ashford, 2008), with women more likely to engage in other-focused than self-focused proactive behaviors as a response to uncertainty.

Third, future research could explore factors that weaken, rather than strengthen, the relationship between proactivity and burnout. While we draw on theoretical arguments from extrinsically regulated motivation to support the idea that impression management motives create more burnout for proactive employees (Bolino, Valcea, & Harvey, 2010; Strauss et al., 2017), scholars could build on arguments from conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) to better understand what mitigates this effect. For example, employees who feel supported by leaders or team members for their proactive efforts may not experience as much drain from this behavior. Alternatively, employees with high felt efficacy to be proactive, such as those with high proactive personality, could perhaps feel less drained because they are able to effectively plan, execute, and reflect on their proactive efforts.

Fourth, future research should examine the potentially positive effects of proactivity driven by financial precarity and fear. The exploratory analyses described above suggest that perceived precarity had a positive indirect effect on adapting at work via fear and proactivity. We treat this finding with caution because we did not hypothesize the relationship a priori. Furthermore, much of this effect appears to be driven by the correlation between proactivity and adaptivity rather than the correlations between financial precarity or fear and adaptivity. Given the exploratory nature of these analyses, future research should examine potential contingencies to understand *when* proactivity motivated by financial precarity and/or fear may have positive outcomes for employees. We encourage scholars to develop theoretically-driven moderating arguments, perhaps based on functional perspectives that argue negative emotions can have positive outcomes under certain conditions (e.g., George, 2011; Elfenbein, 2007).

### **Practical Implications**

We find that financial precarity can motivate employees to be proactive and develop skills to address challenging and demanding situations. At the same time, there is a downside – proactivity driven by financial precarity is depleting. Managers should recognize that employees facing financial precarity will be more burnt out from their efforts to meet their financial needs. Moreover, while managers may not be able to reduce the *objective* financial precarity a person faces (e.g., by increasing pay or wages), our findings suggest a need to help employees better cope with the *psychological* effects of financial precarity. Thus, it is important for leaders to reconsider employee workloads and resources during external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rapp et al., 2021). This could be done, for example, with more frequent check-ins to see how employees are dealing with the challenges associated with uncertain times.

We also find that employees can become burnt out from their proactive efforts, suggesting that managers should recognize that some employees might need time to recover and replenish their energy at work when putting in extra effort to proactively learn new skills. Relatedly, managers should be particularly aware that their employees with high impression management motives are most susceptible and vulnerable to feeling depleted from their proactive efforts. To help reduce the risk of burnout for this group of employees, supervisors may want to explicitly—and publicly—acknowledge and reward those who were proactive while working remotely. Doing so should lessen the need for those with high impression management motives to make extra, and exhausting, efforts to be recognized for their proactivity.

### **Conclusion**

In a multi-wave study of a large sample of employees, we find that financial precarity can motivate proactive skill building via feelings of fear, and that this proactive effort is experienced

as depleting for employees. Thus, we shed light not only on how negative motivational states can spark proactivity at work, but also how this proactive effort fosters burnout. Furthermore, we find that feelings of burnout resulting from proactivity motivated by financial precarity and fear are especially strong for employees with high levels of impression management motives. Our findings demonstrate that employees can proactively address feelings of financial precarity, but that this form of coping may come at the cost of burnout.



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**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations*

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Financial precarity (T1)	2.41	1.11	(.93)												
2. Intrinsic motivation (T1)	4.06	0.80	-.11**	(.87)											
3. Trait negative affect (T1)	2.13	0.73	.31**	-.15**	(.86)										
4. Covid-19 worries (T1)	1.70	0.78	.17**	-.01	.23**	(.79)									
5. Impression management motives (T1)	2.37	0.94	.11**	-.09**	.23**	.11**	(.72)								
6. Fear (T2)	2.20	0.99	.34**	-.15**	.55**	.21**	.22**	(.86)							
7. Proactive skill building (T3)	3.41	0.92	.13**	.18**	.03	.10**	.04	.13**	(.88)						
8. Burnout (T4)	2.68	1.14	.26**	-.20**	.33**	.17**	.14**	.48**	.11**	(.93)					
9. Task adaptivity (T4)	4.03	0.73	.00	.14**	-.16**	-.04	-.09**	-.09**	.30**	-.18**	(.75)				
10. Age	45.40	12.46	-.11**	.14**	-.29**	-.14**	-.31**	-.20**	-.06*	-.30**	.19**	--			
11. Gender	0.80	0.40	.05	-.04	.06*	-.03	-.02	.05	.02	.04	.08**	.00	--		
12. Race	0.89	0.32	-.03	-.03	.00	-.02	.02	.02	.01	.05	.01	.03	.02	--	
13. Working from home	0.91	0.29	.00	-.02	.06*	.05	.01	.05	.02	.06*	-.02	-.02	.05	.09**	--

*Note.* N = 1,315. T = time. Gender (1 = Female, 0 = Male); Race (1 = White, 0 = Non-White); Working from home (1 = Home, 0 = Office).

Cronbach’s alphas reported in parentheses on the diagonal. The variables age, gender, race, and working from home were *not* included in the analyses; they are included in this correlation table for demographic purposes.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2**

*Unstandardized Coefficients from the Path Analysis*

Variables	Fear (T2)		Proactive Skill Building (T3)		Burnout (T4)		Burnout (T4)	
	B	95% C.I.	B	95% C.I.	B	95% C.I.	B	95% C.I.
<i>Focal variables</i>								
Financial precarity (T1)	.16**(.02)	[.118, .201]	.09**(.02)	[.047, .141]			.08**(.03)	[.026, .131]
Fear (T2)			.13**(.03)	[.069, .188]			.42**(.03)	[.356, .490]
Proactive skill building (T3)					.14**(.03)	[.083, .210]	.08*(.03)	[.019, .140]
Impression management motives					.05(.03)	[-.015, .111]	.01(.03)	[-.047, .071]
Impression management x Proactive skill building					.10**(.03)	[.035, .167]	.08*(.03)	[.012, .136]
<i>Control variables</i>								
Trait negative affect (T1)	.64**(.03)	[.573, .703]	-.07(.04)	[-.150, .008]	.43**(.04)	[.344, .508]	.11*(.05)	[.022, .202]
Covid-19 worries (T1)	.09**(.03)	[.029, .145]	.08*(.03)	[.016, .144]	.13**(.04)	[.051, .201]	.08*(.04)	[.004, .147]
Intrinsic motivation (T1)	-.08**(.03)	[-.129, -.019]	.24**(.03)	[.175, .296]	-.26**(.04)	[-.338, -.190]	-.21**(.04)	[-.277, -.136]
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.34		.08		.17		.27	

*Note.* Level 1 n = 1,315, Level 2 n = 43. All variables are within-unit. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported. Values in the parentheses

represent the posterior standard deviations. CI refers to the credibility interval. The *R*<sup>2</sup> results were obtained from OLS analyses; while OLS

regression generates biased parameter and standard errors when analyzing multilevel data, it also provides an unbiased approximation of effect-

size estimates for the overall variance in individual-level outcomes that is explained by individual-level predictors (see Hofmann et al., 2003, p.

174; LaHuis et al., 2014; Wallace et al., 2009).

\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01.

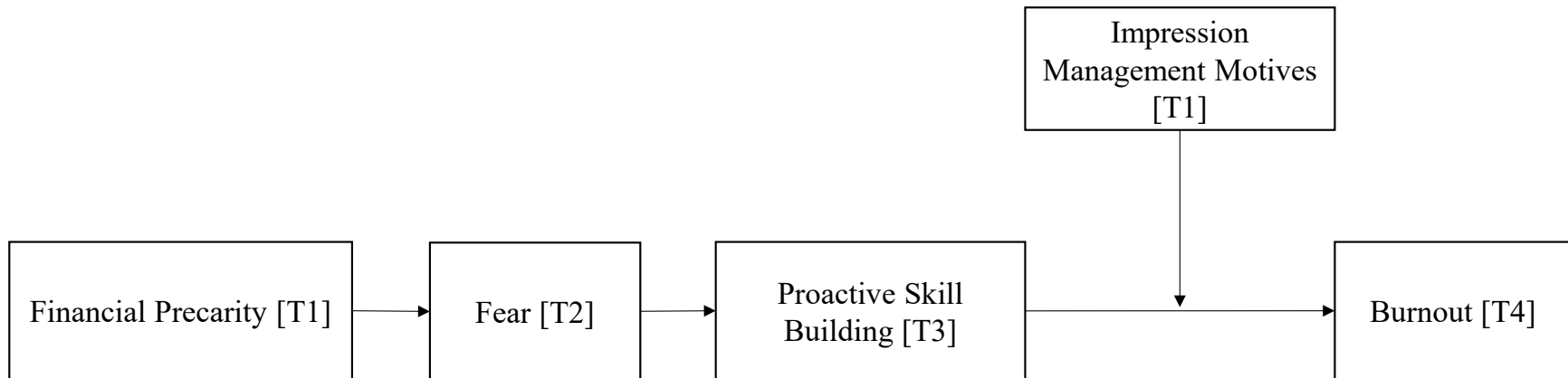
**Table 3**

*Summary of Hypothesized Indirect Effects and Conditional Indirect Effects*

Paths and effects	IM motives	Estimate	95% CI
Financial precarity → fear → proactive skill building (H1)	--	.020**(.006)	[.010, .032]
Financial precarity → fear → proactive skill building → burnout (H2)	--	.002*(.001)	[.001, .003]
Proactive skill building → burnout (H3)	Low	.043 (.045)	[-.044, .133]
	High	.244** (.048)	[.148, .335]
Financial precarity → fear → proactive skill building → burnout (H4)	Low	.000 (.001)	[-.002, .002]
	High	.003** (.001)	[.001, .006]

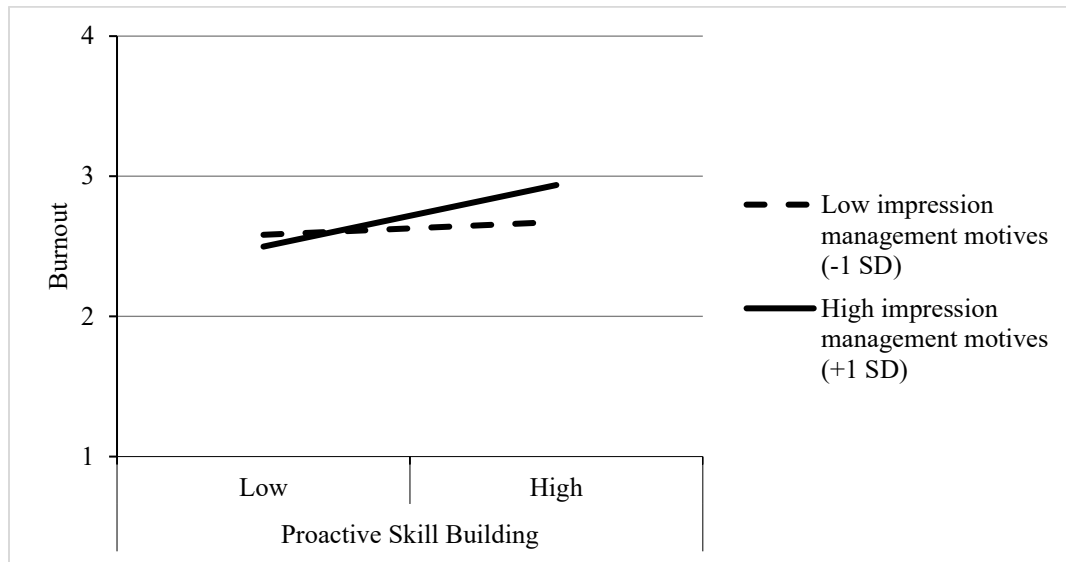
*Note.* Unstandardized coefficients are reported with posterior SDs in parentheses. CI refers to the credibility interval. IM motives = Impression management motives.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Figure 1***Proposed Theoretical Model*

**Figure 2**

*The Moderating Effect of Impression Management Motives on the Relationship Between Proactive Skill Building and Burnout*



## Appendix A

### Analysis of Potential Non-Response Bias

We followed recommendations of Rogelberg and Stanton (2007) to test potential nonresponse bias. First, we conducted a wave-analysis to determine if early responders differed from late responders. Paired t-tests revealed no significant differences by wave for the independent, mediating, dependent, and moderating variables. Second, we compared the means for the independent and moderating variables for Time 2 respondents to those who only participated at Time 1. Time 2 respondents reported relatively lower financial precarity ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.12$  vs.  $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $t = 3.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and lower impression management motives ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 0.94$  vs.  $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ,  $t = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ) compared to those who responded only at Time 1. Third, we compared the means for the mediating variable, fear, for Time 3 respondents vs. those who only responded at Time 1 and Time 2. We found Time 3 respondents reported less fear ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.00$  vs.  $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $t = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Last, we compared the means for the second mediating variable, proactivity, for Time 4 respondents vs. those who only responded at Times 1-3. Time 4 respondents reported no differences in proactivity compared to those who only responded to the first three surveys ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.92$  vs.  $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $t = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.97$ ). Because non-responders reported more financial precarity and fear compared those who completed all surveys, our results may be a conservative test of the hypotheses.

## Appendix B

### Survey Items

#### **Financial precarity** (Meuris & Leana, 2018)

Over the last month, how often have you...

1. felt overwhelmed by your financial obligations.
2. felt worried about your finances.
3. felt that you don't have enough money.

#### **Fear** (Diener et al., 1995; Watson & Clark, 1994)

To what extent have you felt this way during the past month?

1. afraid
2. nervous
3. anxious

#### **Proactive skill building** (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998)

Over the last month, I have...

1. proactively developed skills which are needed as my job role evolves.
2. gained experience in a variety of work assignments to increase my knowledge and skills.
3. developed more knowledge and skill in tasks critical to how my team or unit operates.
4. proactively sought out opportunities to handle challenges on the job.

#### **Impression management motives** (Rioux & Penner, 2001; Yun et al., 2007)

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. I am changing my behaviors to create a good impression on others.
2. I am changing my behaviors to "be seen" by my supervisor.
3. I try to make it look like I am busy to others.

#### **Burnout** (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)

Full items available from the authors upon request.

#### **Intrinsic motivation** (Grant, 2008)

I am motivated to do my work because:

1. I enjoy the work itself.
2. The work is fun.
3. I find the work engaging.

#### **Trait negative affect** (Example items from MacKinnon et al., 1999)

Thinking about your own personality, irrespective of the current situation, to what extent do you typically feel the following? That is, on average, how often do you feel:

1. afraid
2. upset
3. nervous

#### **COVID-19 worries**

Please indicate the extent to which you are worried about the following:

1. that you might have COVID-19.
2. that one of the people living in your household might have COVID-19.
3. that a member of your family or a close friend might have COVID-19.



## Appendix C

## Confirmatory Factor Analyses – Details of Model Comparisons

Model	$\chi^2$	<i>Df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
1. Full eight-factor model	1810.89	349		0.06	0.05	0.94	0.93
2. Seven-factor model <sup>a</sup>	4220.18	356	1857.12**	0.09	0.10	0.83	0.81
3. Seven-factor model <sup>b</sup>	5148.25	356	2520.57**	0.10	0.11	0.79	0.76
4. Seven-factor model <sup>c</sup>	4970.46	356	2432.82**	0.10	0.09	0.80	0.77
5. Seven-factor model <sup>d</sup>	2718.77	356	1122.09**	0.07	0.07	0.90	0.88
6. Seven-factor model <sup>e</sup>	4653.66	356	2403.68**	0.10	0.13	0.81	0.79
7. Seven-factor model <sup>f</sup>	3796.03	356	1819.46**	0.09	0.08	0.85	0.83
8. Seven-factor model <sup>g</sup>	2600.18	356	866.73**	0.07	0.06	0.90	0.89
9. Seven-factor model <sup>h</sup>	4911.05	356	2387.23**	0.10	0.09	0.80	0.78
10. Seven-factor model <sup>i</sup>	2736.72	356	1137.30**	0.07	0.07	0.90	0.88
11. Seven-factor model <sup>j</sup>	2694.03	356	939.24**	0.07	0.07	0.90	0.88

*Note.* Comparisons were made between the full model (Model 1) and all possible seven-factor models: <sup>a</sup> Model 2 (financial precarity and fear on one factor), <sup>b</sup> Model 3 (financial precarity and proactivity on one factor), <sup>c</sup> Model 4 (financial precarity and burnout on one factor), <sup>d</sup> Model 5 (financial precarity and impression management motives on one factor), <sup>e</sup> Model 6 (fear and proactivity on one factor), <sup>f</sup> Model 7 (fear and burnout on one factor), <sup>g</sup> Model 8 (fear and impression management motives on one factor), <sup>h</sup> Model 9 (proactivity and burnout on one factor), <sup>i</sup> Model 10 (proactivity and impression management motives on one factor), and <sup>j</sup> Model 11 (burnout and impression management motives on one factor). Control variables were modeled as distinct factors in all models above. RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index. Reported SRMR is within-level.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .