



# Fear, psychological acceptance, job demands and employee work engagement: An integrative moderated meditation model

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## ABSTRACT

The revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST) was used to examine the association between individual differences in FFFS-fear (threat detection/avoidance) and BIS-anxiety (conflict detection/cautious approach), psychological acceptance and job demands on work engagement. Moderated mediation analysis was used to test a model assessing the indirect path between BIS-anxiety/FFFS-fear and work engagement via psychological acceptance across high and low demanding jobs. Using a sample of 228 casual, part-time and full-time workers we found that FFFS-fear, rather than BIS-anxiety, predicted lower psychological acceptance which, in turn, was associated with lower work engagement; this indirect effect was only evident when the job was considered demanding. These results suggest that interventions for improving work engagement may be enhanced by targeting psychological acceptance, particularly in highly demanding jobs.

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## 1. Introduction

An increasingly important concept in organisational psychology is work engagement. Work engagement is conceptualised as a work-related positive state of mind consisting of vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). High work engagement is negatively correlated to job burnout and predicts better job performance, customer satisfaction and financial returns of a company (e.g., Schaufeli, Taris, & van Rhenen, 2008; Xanthopoulos, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Given the importance of high work engagement to employees and their employers, research investigating factors that can enhance work engagement is vital. In this study, we continue an avenue of research using Gray's Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST; Gray & McNaughton, 2000) to examine the relationships between individual differences, situational factors and work engagement.

### 1.1. Fear and anxiety distinction in the revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory

Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory is increasingly becoming one of the most predominant theories in the study of personality (Corr, 2004). The original RST proposed three motivational systems: the Behavioural Approach System (BAS), the Behavioural Inhibition

System (BIS) and (to a lesser extent) the Fight and Flight Systems (FFS; Gray, 1970). BAS was proposed as the basis underpinning individual differences in sensitivity to reward, while BIS was the basis of punishment sensitivity and an anxiety response in light of conditioned threat cues. The main role of the FFS was in a fear response to unconditioned threat cues (Gray, 1982). However, of particular interest to the current study, while the original RST distinguished between (FFS-mediated) fear and (BIS-mediated) anxiety, in practice fear and anxiety tended to be subsumed under a more general "punishment sensitivity" (Corr, 2004; Smillie, Pickering, & Jackson, 2006). This was despite growing support for the demarcation between fear and anxiety. For example, animal research showed defensive behaviours could be differentiated pharmacologically, with one class of drugs affecting anxiety reactions and one class of drugs influencing panic (fear) reactions (Blanchard, Griebel, & Blanchard, 2001). In humans, pharmacological interventions also differentiated the fear and anxiety systems (White & Depue, 1999).

In light of growing evidence supporting the distinction between BIS-mediated anxiety and FFS-mediated fear and advances in the neuroscience of emotions, a revised version of the theory was developed (Gray & McNaughton, 2000, See Corr, 2004 for a review of the history of RST). Specifically, the Fight, Flight and Freeze System (FFFS) became the primary detector of threat while the revised BIS (r-BIS) became a conflict detector between the BAS and FFFS. The BAS remained relatively unchanged (although see Smillie et al., 2006). A recent body of research continues to support the separation of fear and anxiety with confirmatory factor analysis finding distinct "fear" and "anxiety" factors (Cooper, Perkins, & Corr, 2007). Further, fear has been found to predict unique variance

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over anxiety in performance in a military setting (Perkins, Kemp, & Corr, 2007). Although ongoing, such studies support the contention that fear and anxiety should not be treated as interchangeable constructs and may offer specific, separate pathways to organisational outcomes.

Despite ongoing work on available measurement options, including the use of threat scenarios (e.g., Perkins, Cooper, Abdelall, Smillie, & Corr, 2010), applied research using RST has been severely limited by the lack of purpose-built, validated measures of the revised theory. One widely used measure of the original theory, Carver and White's (1994) BIS scale incorporates items of fear and anxiety and as such has been proposed as a proxy measure of fear and anxiety (e.g., Heym, Ferguson, & Lawrence, 2008). Items such as 'I feel worried when I think I have done poorly at something important,' have been shown to load onto an Anxiety factor, while other items such as, 'I have very few fears compared to my friends,' load onto a Fear factor (Heym et al., 2008). However, given the lack of items specifically assessing fear and the distinct behavioural outcomes of the r-BIS (i.e., an approach component) there is debate as to whether this measure is an appropriate measure of the revised theory (e.g., Poythress et al., 2008). To date, the only published scale specifically developed to distinguish fear from anxiety is the Jackson 5 (Jackson, 2009). In addition to a BAS subscale assessing approach to reward, the Jackson 5 consists of a fear (FFFS) subscale with items tapping Fight, Flight and Freeze, e.g., 'I can't help but feel terrified when I see a dangerous animal', 'If approached by a suspicious stranger, I run away', and an anxiety (r-BIS) subscale: 'I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my abilities to others.' The r-BIS items tap social situations because they tend to evoke both reward and punishment, inducing goal conflict (Smillie et al., 2006). For instance, a person rejected from a group feels punishment but may also wish to re-join that group (Corr, 2005). FFFS items assess the tendency to experience fear and to escape from the threat by running away (flight), remaining motionless (freeze), and fighting back (fight). Although still very new, Jackson (2009) found the scales to be internally reliable, structurally consistent with the revised theory and to correlate in a theoretically consistent manner with other indices of fear, anxiety, psychopathy and delinquency.

### 1.2. Psychological acceptance as a mediator of fear/anxiety and work engagement

To date, few studies have explicitly tested the associations between fear and anxiety in areas of work outcomes with most research still using measures based on the old theory (Smillie, Loxton, & Avery, 2011). For example, previous research has found employees high in (original) BIS show lower work engagement and lower work performance while employees high in BAS show higher work performance, but only when they are in rewarding climates (Izadikhah, Jackson, & Loxton, 2010; van der Linden, Taris, Beckers, & Kindt, 2007). Whilst there was little change to the BAS in the revised theory, the major changes to BIS raise the question as to whether fear (i.e., threat sensitivity) or anxiety (i.e., conflict sensitivity) is the key punishment-sensitive trait associated with work engagement. Moreover, little research has examined potential mediators of the associations between personality traits and organisational outcomes. We propose that psychological acceptance is a plausible mediator of this relationship linking distal fear and anxiety sensitivities with more proximal work engagement. Psychological acceptance is defined as accepting thoughts and feelings and is the opposite of attempting to control thoughts and feelings (Hayes et al., 2004). Psychological acceptance is likely to be linked to FFFS and r-BIS given both are linked to a broad vulnerability to experiencing negative emotions (See Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Vulnerability to negative emotions may lead to low

acceptance if a person's natural tendency is to avoid situations (in part by suppressing or redirecting thoughts) that trigger negative emotions, thereby negatively reinforcing avoidant behaviour (i.e., showing low acceptance). Supporting this, psychological acceptance correlates negatively with various measures relating to fear and anxiety such as blood phobia, agoraphobia and general anxiety (Hayes et al., 2004).

However, such studies do not distinguish between fear and anxiety. FFFS is behaviourally associated with a tendency to use avoidance strategies to alleviate fear while r-BIS is behaviourally more complex in that a cautious approach response is just as likely to occur (after initial interruption). As an avoidant (rather than approach) response we would expect that FFFS rather than r-BIS would more likely be linked to acceptance. However, this is still an empirical question as this is the first study to test these associations. Further, lower psychological acceptance has been associated with anxiety, depression, stress, poor mental health, and lower workplace performance (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Hayes et al., 2004). We propose that low psychological acceptance will mediate FFFS/r-BIS and poorer work engagement.

### 1.3. Job demands as a moderator

Given that psychological acceptance is the tendency to *not* control emotions, research on emotional control may have implications for the effect of situational factors, such as job demands on psychological acceptance and work outcomes. For instance, Wegner, Erber, and Zanakos (1993) asked participants in a laboratory experiment to become "more happy" (i.e., given instructions to control their emotions). Participants reported feeling happier, but only if they were not under additional cognitive load (i.e., from having to remember a 9 digit number). Those who were asked to control their emotion and who were also under cognitive load reported feeling sadder. As such, the effect of psychological acceptance (i.e. the absence of any attempt to control emotions) on work engagement is likely to be moderated by aspects of the environment that impact on cognitive load such as job demands whereby employees have insufficient time to complete tasks, excessive workloads and tasks that require large amounts of effort (Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison, & Pinneau, 1980). We would therefore expect that high psychological acceptance would be associated with higher work engagement in jobs that are highly demanding but would have little effect in jobs that are low in demands.

### 1.4. Summary of model and hypotheses

The aim of the study is to further extend research investigating individual differences in fear and anxiety in organisational outcomes, specifically work engagement, by examining the mediating role of psychological acceptance and the moderating role of job demands. Furthermore, we use a measure specifically developed to measure FFFS separately from r-BIS (the Jackson 5). It is still unknown whether fear or anxiety is the trait more strongly associated with psychological acceptance and work engagement. However, as FFFS is conceptually linked to defensive avoidance and r-BIS is linked to defensive approach we would anticipate FFFS to be more strongly associated with lower psychological acceptance (Hypothesis 1). Further, it is predicted that lower psychological acceptance will in turn be associated with lower work engagement (Hypothesis 2). We further hypothesise that the indirect effect of FFFS/BIS on work engagement via psychological acceptance will occur at high (but not low) levels of demands; notably we hypothesised an interaction between psychological acceptance and job demands on work engagement (Hypothesis 3; see Fig. 1).

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