



Being engaged when resources are low: A multi-source study of selective optimization with compensation at work



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ABSTRACT

This study examined self-regulation in the form of selective optimization with compensation (SOC) at work as a moderator of the relationships of job control (as a job resource) and feeling recovered and energized in the morning (as a personal energy resource) with self- and coworker-rated work engagement. SOC was hypothesized to offset low levels of job control and low levels of personal energy. Based on a sample of 405 public-service employees in Germany, including a multi-source subsample of 141 employees and their respective coworkers, the results showed that SOC use moderated the relationship between the level of personal energy and self-ratings as well as coworker ratings of work engagement such that SOC mitigated low levels of personal energy. SOC at work did not offset low job control. The results suggest that using SOC is particularly important when employees lack energy. SOC strategies should, therefore, be fostered by managers and organizations.

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1. Introduction

Work engagement as the integrative experience of being energetic, committed, and immersed in one's work (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) has a significant impact on positive individual and organizational outcomes such as personal initiative (Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008), work performance (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011), and individual well-being (Schaufeli, Bakker, & van Rhenen, 2009). Therefore, knowing how work engagement can be promoted is crucial.

In this regard, empirical evidence suggests that resources – which are those aspects of a job or person that are instrumental to accomplish work-related goals, to deal with job demands, and to achieve personal development (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) – are the most important antecedents of work engagement (Christian et al., 2011; Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). That is, as proposed in the job-demands resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and its extension to personal resources (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007), both external job resources (e.g., job control, social support) and internal personal resources (e.g., energy, self-efficacy) predict work engagement. Consequently, existing interventions to foster work engagement mainly focus on enhancing resources (e.g., Cifre, Salanova, & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2011). This approach is, undoubtedly, beneficial to increase employee engagement. Nevertheless, this perspective focuses solely on the availability of resources and, hence, falls short to describe if and how employees can be engaged when resources are lacking and cannot be increased (e.g., for revenue officers who might experience low individual job control due to governmental regulations). Previous research suggests that when there is a shortage of resources, employees cannot obtain work-related goals and will, for this reason, react with reduced work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001).

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In this paper, we argue that work engagement not only depends on the sheer availability of resources but also on the way employees actively handle situations of resource shortage. In this regard, we draw on self-regulation theories, which suggest that employees actively shape their resources in order to adapt to a given situation to attain and maintain goals (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). Accordingly, we argue that the use of adaptive self-regulation strategies benefits work engagement – particularly when resources are low. We hereby focus on a specific self-regulation framework, namely the model of selective optimization with compensation (SOC; Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

1.1. SOC as a behavioral resource

The SOC framework suggests that the coordinated use of three behavioral strategies – selection, optimization, and compensation – helps people stay healthy and productive. When regulating themselves by using SOC, people *select* and prioritize goals, *optimize* the use of resources to reach these selected goals and, simultaneously, *compensate* for a lack of resources by using alternative means or external aids to accomplish their goals. Consequentially, self-regulatory SOC contributes to goal attainment and, thus, represents a behavioral resource (see Zacher, Chan, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2015). Research on SOC at work revealed positive relationships between SOC and favorable work outcomes such as work performance (Bajor & Baltes, 2003), well-being (Wiese, Freund, & Baltes, 2002), and – most important for the present study – work engagement (Weigl, Müller, Hornung, Leidenberger, & Heiden, 2014; Zacher et al., 2015). However, from a theoretical viewpoint, SOC is proposed to not only directly benefit positive outcomes but also to be particularly important when other resources are low (see Riediger, Li, & Lindenberger, 2006) – a proposition not yet studied in the work context.

Emanating from this assumption, the goal of the present study is to examine the particular importance of SOC at work for being engaged when other resources are low. Specifically, building on previous research that identified job control – a job resource defined as employees' perceived autonomy to decide how to accomplish job tasks and pursue work goals (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) – and being recovered and energized in the morning (i.e., personal energy as a personal resource; Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2009) as two important predictors of work engagement (e.g., Crawford et al., 2010; Sonnentag, 2003), the present study examines SOC at work as a moderator of the relationships between job control and work engagement and between personal energy and work engagement. Regarding engagement, we used both self and coworker ratings as independent outcome measures in order to reduce common method bias (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Thereby, we broaden recent research that used other ratings of criterion variables in relation to SOC, likewise (Demerouti, Bakker, & Leiter, 2014; Weigl, Müller, Hornung, Zacher, & Angerer, 2013).

In sum, this multi-source study provides new insights in self-regulation at work and work engagement. Specifically, by examining SOC as a moderator of the relationship between job control as a job resource as well as being energized in the morning as a personal energy resource, we broaden knowledge on the relevance of SOC for work contexts. At the same time, we challenge the assumption that, in either case, employees who lack those resources will be less engaged (Demerouti et al., 2001). Rather, we provide an answer to the question of how employees can effectively manage their resources (Gorgievski, Halbesleben, & Bakker, 2011) to maintain engaged at work. Thereby, we address calls to include personal resources at a behavioral level in research on work engagement (e.g., Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, van Beukelen, & Demerouti, 2014; Weigl et al., 2010) and to pay attention to positive aspects that contribute to the optimal functioning of individuals (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

1.2. SOC as a way to offset resource shortages

Existing empirical research provides striking evidence for the importance of resource availability for work engagement (e.g., Crawford et al., 2010; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). One can, however, easily imagine situations where resources such as job control or personal energy are lacking – with little room for improvement (e.g., for employees who are chronically not well recovered and thus lack energy in the morning, because they have to take care of young children). We propose SOC to countervail such resource shortages, thus enabling employees to be engaged even when their resources, for example job control and personal energy, are low.

SOC is particularly useful in helping employees offset low levels of resources because, theoretically, a distinctive feature of the SOC model is its explicit focus on circumstances of resource shortage. As a form of goal-oriented action regulation (Freund & Baltes, 2002) the combined use of all three SOC strategies helps to maximize resource gains and to minimize resource losses (Hobfoll, 2002) and, thus, to maintain functioning even when facing difficulties (Riediger et al., 2006). Accordingly, Jopp and Smith (2006) found SOC use to be considerably protective under circumstances of limited resources in samples of older individuals. Similarly, employees who use SOC strategies at work should be able to better deal with low resources (Zacher & Frese, 2011) and to be engaged at work even when specific resources are low.

Consequentially, we argue that employees who use SOC can protect and maintain their work engagement even when they lack job control or personal energy. When an employee, for example, is chronically not well recovered and hence lacks personal energy, but selects and prioritizes his or her work goals in accordance to this resource shortage (e.g., by reducing the number of tasks) and, at the same time, optimizes the use of his or her available resources to reach the selected goals (e.g., by using the most efficient way of task accomplishment and, thus, preventing further energy loss), and compensates for this resource shortage (e.g., by asking others for help), he or she will be able to maintain engaged. Hence, we propose that the integrated use of the three SOC strategies helps counteract a lack of job control and personal energy and is therefore particularly important when these resources are low.

With regard to job resources, Young, Baltes, and Pratt (2007) found that SOC interacts with supervisor support in such a way that the use of SOC strategies was particularly beneficial when supervisor support was low. Correspondingly, we argue that using SOC is

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