



# Regulatory job stressors and their within-person relationships with ego depletion: The roles of state anxiety, self-control effort, and job autonomy☆



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## ABSTRACT

Our research aimed at disentangling the underlying processes of the adverse relationship between regulatory job stressors and ego depletion. Specifically, we analyzed whether state anxiety and self-control effort would mediate the within-person relationships of time pressure, planning and decision-making, and emotional dissonance with ego depletion. In addition, we also tested potential attenuating effects of situational job autonomy on the adverse effects of regulatory job stressors on state anxiety, self-control effort, and ego depletion. Based on an experience sampling design, we gathered a sample of 97 eldercare workers who provided data on 721 experience-sampling occasions. Multilevel moderated serial mediation analyses revealed that time pressure and emotional dissonance, but not planning and decision-making, exerted significant serial indirect effects on ego depletion via state anxiety and self-control effort. Finally, we found conditional serial indirect effects of all three regulatory job stressors on ego depletion as a function of job autonomy. Theoretical implications for scholarly understanding of coping with regulatory job stressors are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, employees are increasingly required to work under tight deadlines, to make plans and decisions independently, and to display specific emotions at work (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Kubicek, Paškván, & Korunka, 2015). To meet such requirements, employees have to control and regulate their attention, behavior, and emotions. A large body of evidence shows that such requirements to regulate oneself act as sources of work stress which tax and deplete limited self-regulatory resources (e.g. Alarcon, 2011, Schmidt & Diestel, 2015). In cases of depleted self-regulatory resources, employees are less able to cope with requirements to self-regulate and experience feelings of exhaustion. Such perceived states of a temporarily reduced capacity to regulate one's behavior, attention, and emotions reflect diminished resources and are referred to as ego depletion (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

In order to explain the effects of job stressors on employees' ego depletion, scholars have delineated different theoretical frameworks that expatiate upon underlying cognitive and emotional processes. On the one hand, from an action regulation perspective (e.g. Frese & Zapf, 1994, Hacker, 2003), some authors have argued that job stressors deplete employees' self-regulatory

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resources through overtaxing processes of goal-directed action regulation. Following from the model of self-control strength (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), overtaxing goal-directed action regulation becomes manifest in high volitional self-control effort (Schmidt & Diestel, 2015). On the other hand, from a cognitive appraisal perspective (e.g., Lazarus, 1991), job stressors may deplete employees' self-regulatory resources by first triggering dysfunctional appraisal processes which cause emotions such as state anxiety. Coping with anxiety requires effort in volitional self-control and thus may explain the resource depletion (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007). In sum, action regulation theory predicts that job stressors translate themselves into ego depletion by requiring high levels of self-control effort, whereas cognitive appraisal theory suggests that state anxiety mediates the relation of job stressors to self-control effort and ego depletion.

Although several studies have provided some support for the first theoretical explanation derived from action regulation theory (e.g., Diestel & Schmidt, 2012), scholarly understanding of the underlying psychological processes that determine the adverse effects of regulatory job stressors on ego depletion is largely limited in at least three ways. First, while some authors have proposed that certain job stressors (e.g., emotional dissonance in Diestel, Rivkin, & Schmidt, 2015, p. 810) put high demands on volitional self-control, thus far self-control processes have only been found to mediate the effects of workload on job strain (Diestel & Schmidt, 2012). Thus, we do not know whether self-control processes may also explain the deleterious effects of other regulatory job stressors. Second, most studies are primarily based on interindividual designs, which neglect the substantial within-person fluctuations of regulatory job stressors, emotions, self-control effort, and associated states of ego depletion (Kühnel, Sonnentag, & Bledow, 2012; Rivkin, Diestel, & Schmidt, 2015a). Moreover, all aforementioned theories propose psychological processes and mechanisms that emerge immediately and can therefore only be validly analyzed using an experience sampling design (Fisher & To, 2012). Third, past research has failed to examine other relevant processes that can be derived from the cognitive appraisal perspective and may explain why regulatory stressors cause employees to engage in self-control effort. Thus, scholarly knowledge on the effects of regulatory job stressors on states of ego depletion may benefit from a more integrative conceptual view that clearly differentiates between regulatory job stressors, elicited emotions, self-control processes, and resource depletion.

In light of these issues, our research aims at contributing to the literature in four ways. First, in testing the positive relationships of regulatory job stressors with ego depletion, we focus on three different regulatory job stressors which should cause employees to control and regulate their attention, behavior, and/or emotions: time pressure, planning and decision-making, and emotional dissonance. In doing so, we provide support for the notion that, despite their conceptual differences, all three regulatory job stressors exert their immediate adverse influences on employees' self-regulatory resources through the same mechanisms. Second, drawing on an experience sampling design, we analyze mediating variables, which explain the link of regulatory job stressors to ego depletion, with a design adequate for the proposed immediate within-person effects. Third, based on an integration of action regulation theory, cognitive appraisal theory, and the self-control strength model, we develop a serial mediation model to reveal how exactly regulatory job stressors contribute to resource depletion. By examining both state anxiety and self-control effort as serial mediators in the positive relationships of regulatory job stressors with ego depletion, we are able to integrate diverse explanatory mechanisms derived from theories with different conceptual foci. Fourth, our study also aims at clarifying the processes of how situational job autonomy facilitates coping with regulatory job stressors. Although both action regulation theory and cognitive appraisal theory argue that situational job autonomy should attenuate the adverse effects of regulatory job stressors, both theories postulate different mechanisms to explain its attenuating effects.

### 1.1. Self-control effort as a mediator between regulatory job stressors and ego depletion

According to action regulation theory (e.g. Frese & Zapf, 1994, Hacker, 2003, 2005), goal-directed work behavior can involve both automatic and cognitive processes. Whereas low-structure tasks or simple demands can be met through automatic processes, more complex job situations require analysis of goals and environmental conditions, problem solving, and decision-making, all of which involve high-level cognitive processing (Frese & Zapf, 1994; for examples also refer to Zapf, 2002). Drawing from this distinction, we define regulatory job stressors as those work characteristics that disturb action regulation and thus put high demands on cognitive processing. In particular, we will include time pressure, planning and decision-making, and emotional dissonance in our study to show that, despite their conceptual differences, high quantitative, qualitative, and emotional requirements trigger the same cognitive processes that draw on employees' limited self-regulatory resources.

Time pressure is commonly referred to as the extent to which employees feel that they need to work at a faster than usual pace or have insufficient time to finish their work tasks (Baer & Oldham, 2006; Kinicki & Vecchio, 1994). Based on action regulation theory, Diestel and Schmidt (2012) argued that time pressure (as an aspect of high workload) overtaxes processes of action regulation because employees need to shift and adapt action plans, focus on task-relevant information, and change their goal-related priorities. Such cognitive flexibility of executive mechanisms is effortful and thus puts high demands on volitional self-control. In support of this line of reasoning, Diestel and Schmidt (2012) found mediating effects of self-control processes in the positive relationship of workload (measured via time pressure and concentration demands) with job strain.

Similar arguments can be derived for planning and decision-making. Hacker (2005) theorized that the cognitive processes of flexible planning and complex decision-making are straining because of their requirement to focus attention, to elaborate on different action plans, and to involve working memory capacity. Consistent with this argument, Vohs et al. (2008) showed that high demands on decision-making cause ego depletion.

Finally, emotional dissonance as the most stressful aspect of emotional labor "occurs when an employee is required to express emotions which are not genuinely felt in the particular situation" (Zapf & Holz, 2006, p. 4). Effective coping with emotional dissonance requires employees either to align their emotions with display rules or to show the required emotions without feeling them. Both forms

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