Journal of Vocational Behavior 77 (2010) 412–424

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Vocational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb

Interactive effects of emotional dissonance and self-control demands on burnout, anxiety, and absenteeism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 January 2010
Available online 27 May 2010

Keywords:
Emotional dissonance
Self-control demands
Regulatory resource
Burnout
Anxiety
Absence behavior
Latent moderator analysis

ABSTRACT

Two specific sources of stress at work have recently received increasing attention in organizational stress research: emotional dissonance (ED) and self-control demands (SCDs). Both theoretical arguments and experimental findings in basic research strongly suggest that ED and different SCDs draw on a common limited regulatory resource. Consequently, both kinds of stressors should exert interactive effects on indicators of job strain and well-being. Drawing on two German samples (total $N = 586$), we tested this prediction by examining the interaction effects of ED and different dimensions of SCDs on burnout, anxiety, and absence behavior. Latent moderated structural equation modeling provided support for the hypothesized interactive effects of ED and dimensions of SCDs in predicting burnout, anxiety, and absence behavior. More specifically, with each pair of stressors the effects of one stressor were found to be amplified by the other. Finally, we discuss theoretical and practical implications of our results.

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In many organizations, competency models increasingly include requirements to perform emotional labor and self-control. These models identify the core competencies of employees needed for goal achievement in a given job function or role. The trend is illustrated by the following examples for commonly used behavioral anchors derived from an international human resource consultancy: "controls and regulates his/her emotions in critical situations," "acts purposefully and confidently, especially in ambiguous situations," or "demonstrates high willingness and commitment to outstanding performance" (Penning, 2008). Thus, in today's job settings, emotional adaptability, flexibility, and self-regulation become increasingly important for the achievement of organizational goals (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000; Cascio, 2003).

Such requirements cannot be met by automatic and rigid patterns of behavior, but rather call for a flexible, top-down driven (self-)control of behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Self-control is defined as overcoming, modifying, or inhibiting spontaneous or automatic response patterns, urges, emotions, and desires that would otherwise impede goal-directed behavior (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). For example, employees are required to engage in self-control when they have to concentrate on complex tasks, meet emotional job demands, or follow certain rules. Despite the positive effects of self-control on personal success in many domains of life (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), including job performance (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999), a growing body of evidence strongly suggests that exercising self-control is also associated with psychological costs that can become manifest in psychological strain and impaired well-being (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

Implications of this finding for research on organizational behavior have hardly been explored so far. Only two recent lines of research have provided some evidence for the adverse impact of the exertion of self-control on strain and well-being. First, drawing on basic self-control research, Neubach and Schmidt (2007) focused on three different kinds of self-control demands at work (SCDs), namely impulse control, resisting distractions, and overcoming inner resistances, and found that all three SCDs are

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doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2010.05.006

positively related to indicators of job strain (see also Schmidt & Neubach, 2007; Diestel & Schmidt, 2009). Second, based on Hochschild's seminal work on emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), research has repeatedly shown that meeting emotional job demands can be stressful and associated with strain, especially when emotions have to be displayed that are contrary to one's emotions genuinely felt (Cheung & Tang, 2007). The requirement to display organizationally desired emotions that are not genuinely felt is commonly referred to as emotional dissonance (ED; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Abraham, 1998). Like SCDs, ED has been revealed to predict psychological strain, particulary burnout (Zapf & Holz, 2006).

Researchers of both lines have theoretically referred to the same mechanism to explain the adverse impacts of both stressors. Specifically, ED and SCDs are hypothesized to draw on a common regulatory resource that is limited and supplies different self-control processes (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Zapf & Holz, 2006; Schmidt, Neubach, & Heuer, 2007). The notion of a common and limited resource leads us to predict interactive effects of ED and SCDs: because of the limited availability of that resource, both sources of stress should mutually amplify each other in their effects on strain and well-being. As ED and SCDs have only been examined separately so far, this prediction is largely untested in vocational contexts.

In this article, we examine interactive effects between different kinds of SCDs and ED on job strain (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization) as well as well-being (anxiety). In doing so, we seek to provide evidence for the notion that a simultaneous occurrence of SCDs and ED can challenge employees' regulatory resource capacity, thus leading to higher levels of job strain than accounted for by the sum of the unique effects of both types of stressors. Finally, in addition to self-report measures of strain and well-being, our study also includes an absence measure. So far, absenteeism has not been considered as an outcome of ED and SCDs. In the following, we review the theoretical notions and empirical results on SCDs and ED in turn. Subsequently, we integrate both lines of research and develop our hypotheses.

Self-control demands—a source of stress at work

Several findings in basic research indicate that exercising self-control is stressful and can lead to impairments of cognitive as well as behavioral control and to psychological strain (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003; Oaten & Cheng, 2005). In a series of experimental studies, performance in tasks requiring self-contol was consistently impaired immediately after exercising self-control in a preceding task, like suppressing emotions or inhibiting spontaneous reactions. For example, in a thought control study, Muraven et al. (1998) observed that suppressing forbidden thoughts while writing a short text resulted in a decreased persistence on unsolvable anagrams. In other studies, indicators of self-control performance did not only reflect behavioral control, overcoming inner resistances, or persistence on difficult tasks but also comprised intellectual and executive functioning. For example, Schmeichel et al. (2003) reported impairments of logical reasoning for those who were required to regulate their emotions and attention as compared to those who were not faced with self-control demands (see also Schmeichel, 2007).

Whereas most of the studies on self-control focused on behavioral and cognitive performance, there is also an increasing body of evidence suggesting that SCDs can lead to psychological strain and impaired well-being (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006). For example, in a longitudinal field study, Oaten and Cheng (2005) observed a significant increase in anxiety, emotional distress, and depressive symptoms among students who suffered from academic stress over a month, as compared to a control group. Academic stress is known to be characterized by SCDs, like overcoming inner resistances or resisting distractions. These findings were replicated in other studies with longer time intervals (Oaten & Cheng, 2007).

Inspired by these and related observations, Muraven and Baumeister (2000) proposed a model of self-control strength positing that different kinds of self-control processes draw on and consume a common limited regulatory resource. Parts of this resource are expended each time self-control is exerted. Two key predictions of this model have relevant implications for research on organizational stress: First, if circumstances prevent recovery of that limited resource, people become chronically deficient in self-control and suffer from psychological strain. Second, if two different SCDs have to be met simultaneously or immediately one after another, the amount of resulting resource reduction will be higher than the sum of resources consumed by each self-control process. The latter prediction of a two-way amplification of the effects of different SCDs is consistent with well-established and empirically founded cognitive resource theories explaining interaction patterns observed, e.g., during the performance of dual tasks (Kahnemann, 1973; Schmidt & Dolis, 2009).

The interaction effect between different SCDs not only is reflected by experimental measures of self-control performance (Muraven et al., 1998) but also becomes manifest in exaggerated levels of psychological strain in the long run. For example, Oaten and Cheng (2005) found that academic stress interacts with additional SCDs, which were experimentally induced in such a way that decreases in self-control performance and increases in strain were disproportionally stronger than those of a control group not suffering from academic stress. In this case, students did not have enough time to recover from repeated resource depletion. Therefore, different SCDs seem to amplify their adverse effects on strain. Given the growing requirements to perform emotional labor and self-control which have to be met for goal achievement (Pulakos et al., 2000), SCDs may act as a source of stress in many jobs and, thus, employees repeatedly facing such requirements may suffer from chronic strain, like burnout.

In awareness of the importance of self-control in organizations and findings of basic research on its adverse effects, Neubach and Schmidt (2007) recently examined three different kinds of SCDs which are relevant for various vocational settings and analyzed their relations to job strain and well-being. The first “behavioral” dimension refers to the demand to inhibit spontaneous, impulsive response tendencies and associated emotional states which can e.g. become manifest in huffiness, impatience or injudicious expressions (impulse control). The second “cognitive” dimension involves the requirement to ignore or resist distractions evoked by task-irrelevant stimuli which would otherwise interfere with a successful accomplishment of job-related

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