



Job stressors, emotional exhaustion, and need for recovery: A multi-source study on the benefits of psychological detachment

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines psychological detachment (i.e., mentally “switching off”) from work during non-work time as a partial mediator between job stressors and low work-home boundaries on the one hand and strain reactions (emotional exhaustion, need for recovery) on the other hand. Survey data were collected from a sample of protestant pastors ($N = 136$) and their spouses ($N = 97$). Analyses showed that high workload, emotional dissonance, and low spatial work-home boundaries were related to poor psychological detachment from work during non-work time. Poor psychological detachment in turn predicted high levels of emotional exhaustion and need for recovery. Psychological detachment was a partial mediator between job stressors and strain reactions. This study avoids same-source bias and demonstrates the importance of psychological detachment in the stressor–strain relationship.

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Job stress is a wide-spread phenomenon in today’s jobs, particularly in human-service work (Zapf, 2002). Employees who face job stressors such as a high workload and emotional dissonance often suffer from emotional exhaustion and experience a high need for recovery (De Croon, Sluiter, & Blonk, 2004; Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte, Mertini, & Holz, 2001). Job stressors may increase emotional exhaustion and need for recovery because when confronted with these stressors, employees have to invest extra effort and have to regulate their emotions in order to meet the job demands (Zohar, Tzischinski, & Epstein, 2003). While such dynamics unfold during the fulfillment of work tasks, job stressors may impact emotional exhaustion and need for recovery via a second pathway as well. This second pathway refers to the difficulty of psychologically detaching from work during non-work time, i.e., the inability to refrain from job-related thoughts when being away from the workplace (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). We propose that job stressors make psychological detachment from work less likely which in turn will be related to emotional exhaustion and a high need for recovery.

Another factor relevant for psychological detachment from work during non-work refers to work-home boundaries (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Therefore, we will examine the relationships between spatial and technological boundaries, psychological detachment, and strain reactions (i.e., emotional exhaustion and need for recovery).

So far, research on psychological detachment has relied on self-report measures (e.g., Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Munro, Pastor, Sanz-Vergel, & Garrosa, 2009; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). However, if correlates of psychological detachment are assessed by self-reports as well, common method bias may obscure the underlying relationships. Therefore, we will try to overcome such weaknesses by adding a spouse-report measure of psychological detachment. We conduct our study with protestant pastors as one specific human-service profession (Cotton, Dollard, de Jonge, & Whetham, 2003). Research has shown that the clergy face a high workload (Hill, Darling, & Raimondi, 2003) and high emotional job demands (Ngo, Foley,

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& Loi, 2005). Clergy often report that professional demands intrude into their family lives (Hill et al., 2003; Lee, 1999). Related to these high levels of job-related stressors, high burnout rates are often observed within clergy (Beebe, 2007; Doolittle, 2007).

Our paper contributes to research on job stress, work-home boundaries, and job-stress recovery. First, we will examine if psychological detachment from work during non-work time partially mediates the relation between job stressors and strain reactions. Thereby, we aim at providing more insight into the processes by which job stressors translate into impaired well-being. Second, we add to research on work-home boundaries by examining if and how the lack of basic spatial and technological work-home boundaries hinder psychological detachment from work and by this mechanism might be related to strain reactions. Third, we overcome limitations of earlier research by avoiding same-source bias.

1. Psychological detachment: Concept

Etzion, Eden, and Lapidot (1998) introduced the term *detachment* into the respite literature and defined it as an “individual’s sense of being away from the work situation” (p. 579). Psychological detachment from work refers to a state of mind during non-work time characterized by the absence of job-related activities and thoughts. It implies distancing oneself from the job not only in a physical, but also in a mental sense (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005).

2. Job stressors as predictors of low psychological detachment

Workload and emotional labor are two highly prevalent job stressors in clergy (Hill et al., 2003; Ngo et al., 2005). We propose that high workload will be negatively related to psychological detachment from work when at home. High workload refers to the experience of having too much to do in the time available (Spector & Jex, 1998). Research has shown that high workload is associated with increased negative affect during work and that negative affect tends to spill over from the work to the home domain (Ilies et al., 2007), resulting in prolonged activation when being at home. This prolonged activation is then associated with thinking and ruminating about work-related issues (Brosschot, Gerin, & Thayer, 2006) which makes psychological detachment from work difficult. In addition, when facing a high workload, employees may feel overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done and will continue to think about the tasks to be accomplished even when they are at home. Finally, as Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) have argued, high workload will be associated with an increased anticipation of the next working day, implying cognitions that are incompatible with psychological detachment from work. Empirical research has shown a negative relationship between workload and psychological detachment from work during non-work time (e.g., Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Taris, Geurts, Schaufeli, Blonk, & Lagerveld, 2008). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. High workload is negatively related to psychological detachment from work during non-work time.

We further assume that emotional dissonance – a typical stressor related to emotional labor (Zapf, 2002) – will be associated with poor psychological detachment from work. Emotional dissonance refers to a discrepancy between the requirement to express specific emotions at work and the genuinely felt emotions (Zapf, 2002). For example, emotional dissonance occurs when a pastor must show compassion with a person suffering from a severe illness, but does not experience any genuine warm and sympathetic feelings for this person.

Experiencing emotional dissonance may make it difficult to detach from work during non-work time. Particularly in a profession with strong norms to be compassionate and authentic (cf., Cotton et al., 2003), emotional dissonance will be associated with the subsequent feeling that one has not functioned optimally in a social encounter with a person seeking help or advice. The feeling of not having delivered a good, authentic “service” will make it more difficult to detach from work and may increase the likelihood to ruminate about the social encounter that one has not mastered optimally.

Hypothesis 2. Emotional dissonance at work is negatively related to psychological detachment from work during non-work time.

3. Work-home boundaries as predictors of psychological detachment

We propose that psychological detachment from work during non-work time is also contingent on the spatial and technological boundary arrangements between work and home. Scholars have argued that people create and maintain boundaries between their work and non-work roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). By erecting “mental fences” (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 2), individuals construct “slices of reality” (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 474) associated with specific behaviors, thoughts and role requirements. Boundaries between work and home are not necessarily fully inflexible or impermeable. Rather, individuals differ in the degree to which they create and keep role boundaries – or in other words, integrate versus segment their different life domains (Rothbard, Philips, & Dumas, 2005).

One obvious option of creating boundaries between work and home refers to spatial arrangements. Doing one’s work only at a *specific* physical location outside of one’s home (e.g., in company or church buildings separated from one’s home) represents a situation of rather strong spatial boundaries. In contrast, temporarily working from a home office represents

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