



Selection, optimization, and compensation strategies: Interactive effects on daily work engagement

Hannes Zacher^{a,*}, Felicia Chan^b, Arnold B. Bakker^c, Evangelia Demerouti^d

^a Department of Psychology, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

^b School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

^c Institute of Psychology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

^d Department of Industrial Engineering & Innovation Sciences, Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The theory of selective optimization with compensation (SOC) proposes that the “orchestrated” use of three distinct action regulation strategies (selection, optimization, and compensation) leads to positive employee outcomes. Previous research examined overall scores and additive models (i.e., main effects) of SOC strategies instead of interaction models in which SOC strategies mutually enhance each other’s effects. Thus, a central assumption of SOC theory remains untested. In addition, most research on SOC strategies has been cross-sectional, assuming that employees’ use of SOC strategies is stable over time. We conducted a quantitative diary study across nine work days ($N = 77$; 514 daily entries) to investigate interactive effects of daily SOC strategies on daily work engagement. Results showed that optimization and compensation, but not selection, had positive main effects on work engagement. Moreover, a significant three-way interaction effect indicated that the relationship between selection and work engagement was positive only when both optimization and compensation were high, whereas the relationship was negative when optimization was low and compensation was high. We discuss implications for future research and practice regarding the use of SOC strategies at work.

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1. Introduction

The theory of selective optimization with compensation (SOC) proposes that the processes of selection, optimization, and compensation lead to effective functioning, adaptation, and successful development (Baltes, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Within an action theoretical framework, SOC researchers have argued that the interplay or “orchestration” of three distinct behavioral strategies leads to positive outcomes such as goal accomplishment and well-being, because the combined use of these strategies helps individuals to optimally allocate their limited resources (Baltes & Dickson, 2001; Freund & Baltes, 2000, 2002).

The first strategy, selection, focuses on the choice and prioritization of important goals to pursue, either based on personal preferences or due to resource losses. The other two strategies are concerned with individuals’ resources that are necessary to achieve the selected goals. Optimization means that individuals invest additional resources to achieve their goals, and compensation entails replacing means that do not contribute to goal attainment with more effective means (Freund & Baltes, 2002; see Zacher & Frese, 2011, for work-related examples). Over the past two decades, organizational researchers have demonstrated that the use of SOC strategies predicts outcomes such as work ability, job performance, and occupational well-being (Abraham & Hansson, 1995; Bajor & Baltes, 2003; Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003; Weigl, Müller, Hornung, Zacher, & Angerer, 2013; Wiese, Freund & Baltes, 2002).

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Groningen, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands.
E-mail address: h.zacher@rug.nl (H. Zacher).

A central proposition of SOC theory, however, remains untested in both the organizational literature and the broader literature on the use of SOC strategies in everyday life. Specifically, the “orchestrated,” “synchronized,” and “coordinated” use of SOC strategies should yield better results than their independent use. Goal selection should result in more favorable outcomes if goal pursuit is optimized and resource losses are compensated at the same time (Freund & Baltes, 2000; Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995). Thus, SOC theory suggests that the three strategies should mutually enhance each other's effects on positive work outcomes. So far, however, researchers have only examined effects of overall SOC strategy use (i.e., average scores) and additive (i.e., main) effects of individual SOC strategies. Interactive effects of the three SOC strategies have not yet been investigated despite the assumptions that the strategies are conceptually distinct and that “using multiple strategies may have a larger effect than using only one of the strategies” (Demerouti, Bakker, & Leiter, 2014, p. 103).

Moreover, most previous research on SOC at work has used cross-sectional designs, thus assuming that employees' use of SOC strategies is stable rather than fluctuating over time. Two exceptions are the daily diary studies conducted by Yeung and Fung (2009) and by Schmitt, Zacher, and Frese (2012). Yeung and Fung (2009) showed that age and task difficulty moderated the relationships between daily SOC strategy use and self-rated and objective job performance. Schmitt et al. (2012) found that daily SOC strategy use buffered the positive relationship between daily problem solving demands at work and employees' fatigue at the end of the work day. While both of these studies found that SOC strategy use fluctuated across work days, they did not examine interactive effects of the three SOC strategies on daily work outcomes.

The goal of the quantitative daily diary study reported in this article was to investigate interactive effects of the three SOC strategies on daily work engagement. Work engagement has been defined as a positive and fulfilling state of work-related well-being with physical, emotional, and cognitive components (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Kahn, 1990). SOC theory suggests that the interplay or “coordinated use” of SOC strategies should be positively associated with successful adaptation and well-being at work (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Marsiske et al., 1995). Consistent with the job demands–resources model and its extension to personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007), as well as Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory, SOC strategies can be considered a set of personal behavioral resources that positively predict favorable work outcomes such as work engagement (Schmitt et al., 2012; Weigl et al., 2013). Specifically, the use of SOC strategies at work starts a motivational process during which employees focus their attention on selected work goals, allocate their available resources to these goals, and acquire new, or activate unused, resources to facilitate goal achievement (Baltes & Dickson, 2001; Zacher & Frese, 2011).

According to SOC theory, employees should be most engaged at work if they make use of all three SOC strategies to a great extent. By contrast, their work engagement should be lower if their use of one or more of the three SOC strategies is low and strategies do not mutually facilitate each other's motivational effects (Marsiske et al., 1995). So far, only one cross-sectional study has examined the relationship between SOC strategy use and work engagement (Weigl, Müller, Hornung, Leidenberger, & Heiden, 2014). Specifically, Weigl et al. (2014) collected data from 118 flight attendants and showed that overall SOC strategy use was positively related to work engagement. However, these researchers did not report additive or interactive effects of the three individual SOC strategies on work engagement.

Based on SOC theory, the job demands–resources model, and conservation of resources theory, we propose that daily selection is positively associated with work engagement only when both optimization and compensation are high. Selection involves focusing on a small number of important goals, and this strategy may not be positively related to work engagement per se. However, when the pursuit of selected goals is optimized and actual or potential resource losses are compensated to achieve the goals, employees should feel more engaged in their work (Baltes, 1997; Weigl et al., 2014). Moreover, the job demands–resources model and conservation of resources theory predict that the more employees activate their personal resources, the higher their capability to deal successfully with work demands and to accumulate additional resources such as feelings of engagement at work (Hobfoll, 1989; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Employees' daily work engagement may benefit to a certain extent from the independent use of optimization and compensation strategies due to the associated investment of additional resources, the replacement of inadequate means, and the activation of unused resources. However, according to SOC theory, the effects of daily optimization and compensation on work engagement should be greatest when employees focus their goal-relevant resources and means on a manageable number of carefully selected goals (Baltes, 1997; Freund & Baltes, 2000).

Hypothesis: There is a three-way interaction effect of the daily use of selection, optimization, and compensation strategies on daily work engagement, such that the relationship between selection and work engagement is positive when both optimization and compensation are high, whereas the relationship is not significant or negative when either optimization or compensation, or both optimization and compensation, are low.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

To test our hypothesis, we collected data from 77 employees from Australia, who worked in various jobs and occupations and volunteered to participate in a online daily diary study. Thirty-six participants were female (47%) and 33 were male (43%; eight participants [10%] did not provide demographic information). Ages ranged between 21 and 61 years, with a mean age of 45.12 years ($SD = 10.56$). In terms of highest level of education, 18% of employees had completed high school, 23% held a diploma

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