



## State work engagement and state affect: Similar yet distinct concepts☆



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### ABSTRACT

State work engagement (SWE), a multidimensional construct of work-related well-being, was originally conceptualized as a trait, but diary studies have revealed substantial within-person fluctuations. Given that SWE is conceptualized as a work-related affective-motivational construct, the question arises as to whether SWE can be differentiated from other affective constructs. Thus, the goal of the present study was to compare SWE and state affect with respect to their degree of within-person variability and to examine their distinct relationships with health and performance variables (i.e., sleep quality and job performance). Fifty-two employees (44% female) participated in the study, which included 3 assessments per day over the course of 2 weeks. Our results revealed that energetic arousal and tense arousal fluctuated more strongly within days than vigor and absorption. Multilevel analyses demonstrated that high sleep quality predicted higher state affect but not higher SWE. In addition, vigor exhibited an inverted U-shaped relation with performance. In sum, SWE as a time-varying construct showed some overlap with state affect but also demonstrated discriminant validity.

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### 1. Introduction

Work engagement has been defined as a positive work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Individual differences in work engagement have been shown to be related to outcomes such as organizational commitment (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008), better mental health (Schaufeli, Bakker, & van Rhenen, 2009), or less turnover intentions (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In recent years, many researchers adopted a state perspective on work engagement, which has the advantage that it allows researchers to analyze proximal predictors and outcomes of work engagement (Bakker, 2014; Sonnentag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010). Using a within-person approach, empirical studies demonstrated that a person's work engagement fluctuates substantially from day to day (Ouweneel, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, & van Wijnhe, 2012; Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag, Mojza, Demerouti, & Bakker, 2012; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011) and from week to week (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Kühnel & Sonnentag, 2011) in response to situational conditions and personal experiences. However, as Sonnentag (2011) argued "just looking at the fluctuations in work engagement from day to day might even be a too rough characterization of the dynamics of work engagement" (p. 32). Instead, work engagement may vary from episode to episode within days (cf. Bakker, 2014), similarly to within-day fluctuations of job performance (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005).

The description of work engagement as an "affective-cognitive state" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010 p.13) or as a "distinct positive affective-motivational state" (Salanova, Schaufeli, Xanthopoulou, & Bakker, 2010 p. 126;) exemplifies that the construct is closely

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tied to and may show partial overlap with positive affectivity affect (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). As with work engagement, researchers distinguish between the state and trait components of affect (e.g. Diener & Larsen, 1984; Watson & Clark, 1994). State affect (e.g., the degree to which one feels good vs. bad right now) fluctuates around a dispositional (trait) level of affect (e.g., the degree to which one feels good vs. bad in general). The term “affect” is often used as an umbrella term for discrete emotions (i.e., object-directed states such as anger or pride) and mood states (i.e., affective states that are not directed toward a specific object, such as feeling tired vs. alert). In this paper, we use the term affect to refer to mood states that shape the background of individuals' moment–moment experience (pleasant affect, energetic arousal, and tense arousal; Mathews & Mackintosh, 2000; Schimmack & Grob, 2000). To distinguish between work engagement and affect, different authors have proposed that work engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive state than state affect (e.g. Salanova et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). However, when work engagement is conceptualized as a state that fluctuates from day to day or even within days (Sonnentag, 2011), this time-based distinction between work engagement and affect gets blurred. Therefore, the objective of the present paper was to examine whether work engagement as a time-varying construct can be differentiated from state affect. The differentiation between the two constructs is important in the context of increasing interest in models that conceptualize affect as a predictor or as an outcome of work engagement (e.g. Bledow, Schmitt, Frese, & Kühnel, 2011; Ouweneel, Le Blanc, Schaufeli et al., 2012; Ouweneel, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2012; Salanova et al., 2010).

In our study, we exclusively focused on the work engagement facets of vigor and absorption as the need to empirically distinguish them from state affect (as a component of affective well-being) seemed most pressing. The third facet of work engagement—dedication—refers to the degree to which individuals perceive their work as “a significant and meaningful pursuit” (Bakker, 2014, p. 228). Hence, on the conceptual level, dedication seems to be more closely related to the concept of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which encompasses the degree to which individuals perceive their life to be purposeful and meaningful.

Taken together, the present study examines the distinctiveness of state work engagement (vigor and absorption) vs. state affect (pleasant affect, energetic arousal, and tense arousal)<sup>1</sup> in individuals' daily experiences at work. To go beyond previous studies on state work engagement (SWE)—most of which applied a once-per-day or once-per-week assessment—we aimed to capture the within-day dynamics of SWE and state affect by assessing the constructs twice a day using experience sampling methodology. We consider the following empirical evidence as informative for the distinctiveness of SWE and state affect: (1) Do the constructs demonstrate a different degree of within-person fluctuations? (2) Are the constructs differentially related to a daily predictor variable (sleep quality)? (3) Are the constructs differentially related to a daily outcome variable (work performance)? In the remainder of the Introduction, we derive specific hypotheses related to these three types of empirical evidence.

### 1.1. Within-person variability of SWE and state affect

Theoretical accounts of SWE (e.g., Sonnentag, Dormann et al., 2010; Sonnentag, Binnewies and Mojza, 2010) propose that fluctuations in day-level work engagement are due to fluctuations in day-level job demands, day-level job resources, and day-level personal resources. Moreover, within-day fluctuations in the level of work engagement an individual experiences may stem from characteristics of the specific task the individual is working on at the moment (Sonnentag, 2011)—for instance, writing a report vs. being in a team meeting. That is, within-day fluctuations in SWE are plausible to the extent that demands, resources, and type of tasks to be accomplished also vary within days. On the other hand, theoretical accounts of unfocused state affect (mood) have identified a large number of predictors that are responsible for within-day fluctuations in state affect, ranging from biological processes (e.g., circadian rhythms), events (e.g., daily hassles and uplifts), to activities and behaviors (e.g., regulatory behavior) (for an overview, see e.g., Parkinson, Totterdell, Briner, & Reynolds, 1996). Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that state affect fluctuates more within persons (in particular, within days) than SWE.

Xanthopoulou and Bakker (2013) summarized the findings of seven daily diary studies that analyzed within-person fluctuations in work engagement: Across these studies, 58% of the total variance in SWE, on average, was attributable to between-person variance (i.e., stable individual differences), and 42% was attributable to within-person variance (i.e., fluctuations from day to day). Studies that assessed SWE at least twice a day to examine within-day fluctuations (cf. Sonnentag, 2011) are scarce—to our knowledge, the only published study using such an approach is the study by Bledow et al. (2011). The authors reported that 53% of the variance in SWE was within individuals, but they did not separate this proportion into variance attributable to within-day vs. between-days fluctuations.

<sup>1</sup> To date, research in the organizational context has mostly applied Watson and Tellegen's (1985) two-dimensional model of affect, which includes positive affect (indicated by items such as “alert” or “excited”) and negative affect (indicated by items such as “fearful” or “nervous”) as basic dimensions. The two bipolar dimensions are considered to be independent (uncorrelated). It is important to note, however, that the independence of positive and negative affect in their model does not refer to the independence of opposite poles of one dimension but to two different bipolar dimensions. Positive affect has to be differentiated from pleasant affect, and negative affect has to be differentiated from unpleasant affect. However, the two-dimensional conceptualization of affect implies that pleasantness versus unpleasantness should be a perfect linear combination of negative affect (i.e., the degree to which one feels nervous) and positive affect (i.e., the degree to which one feels alert). In empirical studies, however, this assumption often does not hold (Schimmack & Grob, 2000), and two-dimensional models typically show only modest fit to the data. Research has demonstrated that the three mood dimensions—pleasant affect, energetic arousal, and tense arousal—exhibit different patterns of change following an experimental manipulation (e.g., sleep deprivation; Matthews et al., 1990) and show distinct diurnal patterns. Therefore, we adopted the three-dimensional model of mood in the present study to examine the distinctiveness of state work engagement and state affect.

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