



Affective commitment as a moderator of the adverse relationships between day-specific self-control demands and psychological well-being

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has focused on the day-specific adverse effects of stressors at work. Thus, in the present study, we examine the relationships between day-specific work-related self-control demands (SCDs) as a stressor and day-specific indicators of psychological well-being (ego depletion, need for recovery, and work engagement). On the basis of the limited strength model of self-control, we predict that SCDs deplete limited regulatory resources and impair psychological well-being. Furthermore, we propose affective commitment as a buffering moderator of this relationship. Consistent with the broaden and build theory of positive emotions and the self-determination theory, we suggest that affective commitment satisfies employees basic psychological needs and provides positive emotions, which, in turn, help restore limited regulatory resources. Thus, affective commitment should buffer the negative relationships between day-specific SCDs and day-specific psychological well-being. To examine our hypotheses, we conducted a diary study with $N = 60$ employees over 10 working days and used multi-level models to test our predictions. Our results demonstrated that day-specific SCDs indeed impaired indicators of psychological well-being. Furthermore, affective commitment buffered these adverse relationships; thus, on days with high SCDs, highly committed employees reported higher levels of psychological well-being than did less committed employees.

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Today's work is characterized by highly dynamic and complex environments that require employees to be flexible and adapt to different demands, such as regulate emotions towards colleagues and clients, monitor goal directed behavior or motivate themselves to perform unattractive tasks (e.g., Cascio, 2003). These demands cannot be met by automatic rigid behavioral patterns; rather, they cause employees to exert self-control to cope with these situational requirements (Schmidt & Diestel, in press). Self-control involves the inhibition, modification, or override of spontaneous and automatic reactions, urges, emotions, and desires that would otherwise interfere with goal-directed behavior and impede goal achievement at work (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). Despite the positive effects of self-control on personal success in many domains of life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), a growing body of research indicates that frequent acts of self-control can lead to impairments in cognitive and behavioral control (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). These findings are consistent with the limited strength model of self-control, which states that different acts of self-control consume a common limited regulatory resource and can cause impairments in psychological well-being (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

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Consistent with this proposition, multiple studies have demonstrated that self-control demands (SCDs) at work, which require individuals to engage in self-control, predict strain and impaired psychological well-being (for an overview, see Schmidt & Diestel, *in press*). In view of these detrimental effects of SCDs, previous research has also focused on resources defined as “those (...) aspects of the job that (...) may reduce demands and associated physiological and psychological costs” (Hobfoll, 2002). For example, recent evidence indicates that job control, as an external resource, as well as psychological detachment, as an internal resource, buffer the adverse effects of SCDs (Schmidt & Diestel, *in press*).

However, in reference to at least two issues, scholarly knowledge regarding work-related SCDs is limited: First, although many studies provide strong evidence for negative relationships between SCDs and indicators of psychological well-being at the interindividual level (cf. Diestel & Schmidt, 2009), only one experimental study has demonstrated the intraindividual or day-specific effects of SCDs on well-being (Muraven et al., 2005). Second, our understanding would also benefit from potential moderators of the day-specific relations between SCDs and well-being because experimental research indicates that SCDs do not inevitably result in impaired psychological well-being (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003).

The aim of our present study is to address these drawbacks via an examination of the impact of day-specific SCDs at work on various indicators of psychological well-being (ego depletion, need for recovery, and work engagement). Although SCDs have been demonstrated to be relatively stable sources of work stress (Schmidt & Neubach, 2010), they may also exhibit substantial day-specific fluctuations. For example, on some days, an employee may be involved in frequent quarrels with colleagues or customers at work; thus, these days require the exertion of more self-control than other days on which the same employee has hardly any contact with other individuals at work. Consistent with the strength model of self-control, we predict that high day-specific SCDs consume limited regulatory resources and thus impair day-specific well-being.

Furthermore, we focus on commitment as a potential buffering moderator of the proposed day-specific relationships. In an interindividual cross-sectional study, Schmidt and Diestel (2012) demonstrated that affective commitment moderated (buffered) the adverse impact of job-related SCDs on indicators of psychological strain, such as burnout. Their results are consistent with both the self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). The SDT postulates that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) causes intrinsic motivation, which goes along with more autonomous or self-chosen rather than controlled forms of regulation. Muraven, Gagné, and Rosman (2008) propose that autonomous regulation, in turn, is accompanied by positive emotional states. According to the broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), these positive emotional states have the potential to reduce the harmful consequences of negative emotions, which are caused, for example, by stressors, such as SCDs, and to return bodily functions to a neutral state after stressful events. Integrating both theories, we propose that affective commitment satisfies basic psychological needs and thereby induces positive emotions, which, in cases of high SCDs, replenish regulatory resources and thus prevent impairments of psychological well-being.

Our research offers several contributions to the literature on self-control: First, it may provide initial evidence for day to day variations of SCDs at work by demonstrating that SCDs are not only (interindividual) stable attributes of work but may also exhibit day-specific (intraindividual) fluctuations. The introduction of new methods, such as diary studies, in the field of self-control research may also further help understand job-related SCDs by providing evidence that these demands exhibit high day-specific or meaningful intraindividual variations. Second, our study may provide additional insights into the role of job-related SCDs as a source of stress at work by demonstrating that day-specific SCDs may also impair day-specific psychological well-being. Finally, to our knowledge, the present research is the first to examine the psychological function of affective commitment in coping with day-specific job demands. Thus, we may expand our conceptual view of affective commitment as a protective resource (cf. Meyer & Maltin, 2010) by demonstrating moderating effects of affective commitment on intraindividual relationships between stress and well-being.

We first review the literature on self-control. The concept of organizational commitment will subsequently be discussed. Finally, we integrate both lines of research and derive our hypotheses on the buffering effect of affective commitment.

1. SCDs: A source of stress at work

A large body of empirical evidence has supported the prediction that the exertion of self-control is associated with psychological costs. In a series of experimental studies that demanded two successive acts of self-control (e.g., the suppression of emotions or thoughts and attention control), self-control performance on the second act was consistently impaired, even in apparently unrelated spheres of activity (see Hagger et al., 2010, for a meta-analysis).

While a major part of research has focused on the cognitive and behavioral consequences of self-control (Hagger et al., 2010), recent research in occupational health psychology has also demonstrated that demands on self-control constitute a major stressor at work. Schmidt and Neubach (2007) identified three forms of SCDs at work. First, impulse control refers to the demand to inhibit spontaneous, impulsive response tendencies and associated affective states, which manifest, for example, in injudicious expressions. Second, resisting distractions involves the requirement to ignore or resist distractions evoked by task irrelevant stimuli. Third, overcoming inner resistances relates to the requirement to overcome motivational deficits that result from unattractive tasks. Multiple studies have demonstrated that these forms were related to an increase in indicators of strain (e.g., burnout and depression) and a decrease in productivity (e.g., absenteeism; Diestel & Schmidt, 2011). These adverse effects can be accounted for by the strength model of self-control (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), which proposes that SCDs cause employees to engage in self-control, which, in turn, depletes limited regulatory resources and thereby impairs psychological well-being.

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