When contradictory demands lead to emotional exhaustion. The mediating effect of work intensification

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BACKGROUND

“[Production] and communication need only a fraction the time they took a century ago” (Rosa, 2003, p. 6). These changes indicate that acceleration is an integral part of today’s working life. Indeed, many employees face increasing time pressure and workload (Green, 2004) – a phenomenon termed “work intensification” within Rosas (2005) theory of “social acceleration”. Yet despite the importance of acceleration in modern work, still little is known about the job demands that cause acceleration and about its consequences.

Thus, the present study focuses on a specific work demand, contradictory demands, in relation to work intensification and one possible consequence, emotional exhaustion. Drawing on Glaser and Büssing (1996), we argue that contradictory demands – described as a conflict between demanded and actual work goals, quality of work and competence – cause additional and increased work effort, which in turn leads to stress reactions. To test this assumption a longitudinal study was conducted.

RESEARCH QUESTION
Does work intensification mediate the effect of contradictory demands at measurement point 1 on emotional exhaustion at measurement point 2?

METHOD

participants
591 eldercare workers completed the questionnaire at 2 waves (return rate T1: 54%; T2: 46%); 89 % female; most middle aged (41 – 50 years = 44.8 %); hours of work: 42.8 % worked more than 36 hours / week

procedure
paper and pencil questionnaires were provided at 2 measurement points (15 months time interval)

measures
contradictory demands:
4-item scale; TAA Work Analysis Instrument (Büssing, Glaser, & Häge, 2004); Cronbach’s α T1 = .74; “I receive work assignments, which are contradictory to each other”

emotional exhaustion:
9-item scale; Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-D, Büssing & Perrar, 1992); Cronbach’s α T2 = .91;

work intensification:
5-item scale; Korunka, Ulferts, & Kubicke (in press); Cronbach’s α T1 = .84, T2 = .78; “The number of work tasks during a work day...” on a 5-point scale from 1 = has decreased strongly to 5 = has increased strongly.

The results indicate that the effect of contradictory demands on emotional exhaustion is partially mediated by an increase of work intensity. Therefore it could be shown that contradictory demands constitute a hindrance within the working world. They create a dilemma and lead to negative unavoidable consequences, such as work intensification. Hence, contradictory demands increase the risk of experiencing emotional exhaustion, because they require work intensification and therefore an accelerated pace of work.

RESULTS

SEM analysis (Amos 19.0, Arbuckle, 2010) was conducted. To test whether the observed, manifest variables represent the corresponding latent variables, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The analyses showed that it is possible to distinguish between contradictory demands, work intensification and emotional exhaustion (3 factor model) and therefore the supposed structure could be replicated.

Structural equation modeling yielded satisfactory fit indices (3 factor model). The effect of contradictory demands (T1) on emotional exhaustion (T2) (β = .30; p < .01) was partially mediated by the increased work intensity (standardized residuals from T1 to T2) (β = .15; p < .05; β = .26; p < .01). The indirect effect was significant. The direct effect explained 11% of variance in emotional exhaustion T2, with the indirect effect 15% could be explained.

DISCUSSION

Thus these findings partially support Glaser and Büssing’s (1996) assumptions and call for attention from occupational health psychologists. Given the rapid changes in modern work environments the findings suggest the importance of protective factors in coping with acceleration and work demands to ensure well-being. Further these results show the importance of constant, transparent demands to avoid negative consequences such as work intensification.

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references