Detachment

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Definition  Detachment refers to an “individual’s sense of being away from the work situation” (Etzion, Eden, & Lapidot, 1998, p. 579). Effective detachment requires both a mental and physical disengagement from the work environment (c.f., Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Introduction  
Traditionally, detachment (also known as “psychological detachment”) has been examined through the lens of industrial and organizational psychology and occupational health psychology. The term was introduced by Etzion et al. (1998), and is most commonly measured with a subscale of the Recovery Experiences Questionnaire (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Detachment is commonly thought of as a recovery experience, which refers to experiences that allow for recuperation from job stress. Recovery experiences can occur during various time windows, including short breaks during work (i.e., microbreaks, see Trougakos & Hideg, 2009), lunch breaks, evenings, weekends, vacations, and sabbaticals. In addition to detachment, other recovery experiences that have been examined include relaxation, mastery experiences, control during nonwork time, social activities, and work reflection (both positive and negative).

Theoretical Background  
Research on detachment has drawn largely on two theoretical frameworks – namely, the Effort-Recovery Model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). More recently, Sonnentag and Fritz (2015) provided a framework specifically related to detachment. These theories and frameworks are reviewed briefly below.
**Effort-recovery model.** According to this theoretical model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998), work is seen as a stressful experience that generally taxes an individual’s cognitive, emotional, and physical resources. In the absence of some period of recovery (i.e., mental or physical), ongoing exposure to work demands can result in chronic stress and fatigue as resources are depleted. This process can be halted, however, by removing work demands for a period of time – such as a work break, evening, weekend, or vacation. Recovery experiences – including detachment – are conceptualized as periods during which work demands are removed and an individual is able to prevent further resource loss as a consequence of work demands. By engaging in detachment, it is more likely that individuals are able to distance themselves from work demands, and thus able to reduce the likelihood of strain reactions, such as reduced well-being or increased fatigue.

**Conservation of resources (COR) theory.** COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is commonly drawn upon to argue for the beneficial effects of detachment, though this theory has often been criticized for its lack of specificity regarding key definitions. According to COR theory, resources include objects (e.g., a house), energies (e.g., vigor), conditions (e.g., academic tenure), or personal characteristics (e.g., conscientiousness) that an individual values or that serve to procure further resources. Individuals are in turn motivated to protect, maintain, and build these resources. Stress results after a threat to one’s resources, an actual loss of resources, or a failure to gain resources after an investment of resources. A recent review of research on COR theory suggests that recovery experiences such as detachment can be construed as an “energy” resource (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014). Further, detachment is one such experience that may offset the loss of resources or allow for the replenishment of lost resources, such as energy and positive mood.
**Stressor-detachment model.** In 2015, Sonnentag and Fritz provided a review of the detachment literature to date and offered a conceptual framework to explain the associations between job stressors, detachment, and well-being outcomes. The basic stressor-detachment model suggests that job stressors are associated with reduced detachment, which in turn is associated with strain and impaired well-being outcomes (e.g., burnout, fatigue, etc.). However, detachment can also serve as a moderator of the relationship between job stressors and strain, such that those who engage in more detachment experience a weakened relationship between job stressors and strain. An extended stressor-detachment model offered by Sonnentag and Fritz proposes that factors influencing primary and secondary stress appraisals (e.g., attentional processes, personal and job resources) may moderate the link between job stressors and detachment, and further, that the content of job-related thoughts (e.g., positive re-appraisal, problem-focused coping) may moderate the association between detachment and strain outcomes. Additional research is needed on these relationships to determine the veracity of the extended stressor-detachment model.

**Hereditability & Development**

To date, no research has examined the role of genetics or heredity in explaining individual levels of detachment. A small number of studies (e.g., Hahn et al., 2011; Michel, Bosch, & Rexroth, 2014) have demonstrated the effectiveness of interventions for increasing levels of detachment and other recovery experiences, suggesting that detachment levels are not entirely static. Additional support for individual variability in detachment comes from studies which utilize experience sampling methodology to examine day-to-day fluctuations in detachment (e.g., Sonnentag & Binnewies, 2013).

**Measurement**
A range of nonwork time periods and settings have been examined in regards to detachment from work, including work breaks, evenings, weekends, vacations, and sabbaticals. The Recovery Experiences Questionnaire (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007) is most frequently used to measure detachment from work. A four-item subscale assesses detachment levels with the following questions: “I forget about work,” “I don’t think about work at all,” “I distance myself from my work,” and “I get a break from the demands of work.” Participants are typically asked to respond to these questions with respect to their free evenings on a five-point scale from 1 (I do not agree at all) to 5 (I fully agree). The instructions or stem for these questions can be adjusted based on the time period in question. For example, researchers seeking to implement this scale using an experience sampling methodology may adjust the stem of each item to say, “Today, I forgot about work,” or “Last night, I forgot about work.” Most frequently, one’s overall level of detachment is calculated using the scale mean, with higher numbers indicating higher detachment.

Psychological detachment has been examined as both a between-person (i.e., on average, some individuals engage in more or less detachment than other individuals) and within-person (i.e., individuals experience more detachment on some days as compared to others) phenomenon, with variability found at both levels. Research has shown that individuals do tend to vary in their detachment levels across days, suggesting that contextual or individual factors may influence this variability. Indeed, as reviewed below, job stressors such as workplace aggression, workload, and time pressure have been shown to reduce levels of detachment in the evenings.

Findings on Detachment

The stressor-detachment model (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015) provides a fairly comprehensive review of the work done to date on predictors and outcomes of detachment. The
following section offers a summary of this work, and includes more recently published work that was not included in this 2015 review. In the following sections, an effort is made to differentiate findings at the between-person level from those at the within-person level. Earlier reviews on detachment can be found in Sonnentag (2012) and Fritz, Ellis, Demsky, Lin, & Guros (2013).

Predictors

**Individual differences.** Research on detachment has less often focused on the role of individual differences, though several studies have examined the association between personality variables and detachment. In their scale validation, Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) found no significant correlations between detachment and agreeableness, openness, extraversion, or conscientiousness. Emotional stability was moderately and positively correlated with detachment, however, such that those higher on emotional stability also reported higher levels of detachment. It should be noted that these relationships were generally in line with Sonnentag and Fritz’s initial hypotheses. Though not a hypothesized relationship, Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) found a positive association between detachment and action-state orientation, an individual difference variable characterized by the ability to allocate attention to the present task at hand. Negative affectivity has also been negatively associated with psychological detachment (Moreno-Jiménez, Rodríguez-Muñoz, Pastor, Sanz-Vergel, & Garrosa, 2009). Potok and Littman-Ovadia (2013) found that attachment avoidance (i.e., indicated by a lack of confidence in interpersonal relationships and a desire for autonomy) moderates the association between workload and self-reported detachment, such that this association was significant for those low in attachment avoidance, but nonsignificant for those high in attachment avoidance.

**Contextual variables.** To date, between-person studies have typically relied on cross-sectional designs to examine variables such as workload and time pressure as predictors of poor
detachment. Several studies have established a relationship between high levels of workload, overtime hours, and poor detachment (e.g., Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Several additional job stressors have been associated with lower detachment, including: workplace aggression, cognitive demands, situational constraints, emotional dissonance, emotional demands, role ambiguity, and role conflict (e.g., Demsky, Ellis, & Fritz, 2014; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

While there are fewer within-person studies examining predictors of detachment, those that exist tend to confirm what the above between-person studies have established. Social conflicts with customers have been associated with reduced detachment in the evening, with this relationship being mediated by negative affect (Volmer, Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Niessen, 2012). Similarly, negative events during the workday were associated with lower evening detachment. As one might expect, researchers have found that engaging in work-related activities in the evening, chronic time pressure and daily work hours are associated with lower detachment at bedtime (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

Family members have also been shown to play a role in employees’ detachment. For example, absorption in joint activities with a partner has been shown to facilitate increased detachment (Kühnel, Sonnentag, & Westman, 2009). Both employees’ and their partners’ work-home segmentation preferences are associated with employees’ psychological detachment, though this relationship is weakened with the presence of children in the home (Hahn & Dormann, 2013). Spousal support for recovery (e.g., “I provide support or assistance for my spouse to relax or do relaxing things”) is also positively associated with increased detachment (Park & Fritz, 2015).

**Outcomes**
Detachment has typically been associated with a range of positive outcomes for employees and organizations. The majority of research on the topic has examined individual-level outcomes of detachment, however. These outcomes can generally be divided into two categories – employee well-being outcomes (e.g., burnout, stress, life satisfaction) and work-related outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, job performance, creativity). Similar to the research on predictors of detachment, this research can generally be divided into between-person studies and within-person studies.

**Employee well-being.** A number of positive outcomes have been linked to detachment from work (or conversely, poor detachment has been associated with poor well-being outcomes). At the between-person level, these include declines in burnout, occupational stress, negative activation, fatigue, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression, psychological distress, and physical complaints. Detachment has also been linked to increased positive affect, life satisfaction, and sleep quality. Within-persons, detachment has been associated with reduced exhaustion, work-home interference, negative affect, and fatigue, and higher levels of vigor and positive affect (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

**Work-related outcomes.** To date, much of the research on outcomes of detachment has focused on well-being outcomes, though several studies have linked detachment to improved performance. Fritz et al. (2010) found a curvilinear relationship between detachment and task performance, as well as between detachment and personal initiative. These findings suggest a potential “sweet spot” for detachment, such that when one detaches too little or too much, work performance suffers. However, at a moderate level of detachment, work performance benefits. In the case of too little detachment, one’s resources may be diminished and unable to be restored, in turn harming performance. In the case of too much detachment, it may be difficult to reengage
with work upon returning, resulting in a loss of performance. Additionally, some research has found a positive association between detachment and work engagement (Kühnel et al., 2009).

**Detachment as a Moderator and Mediator**

More recently, scholars have begun to examine the role of detachment as either a moderator or mediator of the relationship between workplace stressors and employee outcomes.

**Moderator findings.** A number of studies have examined the role of detachment as a buffer of the association between job stressors and strain outcomes, under the assumption that job stressors continue to affect employees outside of work, and that engaging in detachment can reduce some of the negative effects of job stressors. Detachment attenuates the relationship between workplace bullying and psychological strain (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009) as well as between emotional conflicts at work and poor well-being (Sonntag, Unger, & Nagel, 2013). Another study found that detachment moderated the relationship between quantitative job demands and both psychosomatic complaints and low work engagement (Sonntag et al., 2010). Detachment in the evenings has also been shown to moderate the daily spillover of negative affect from work (Sonntag & Binnewies, 2013). On the other hand, evening detachment has been shown to moderate positive associations between flow at work and after-work energy levels (Demerouti, Bakker, Sonntag, & Fullagar, 2012).

**Mediator findings.** In addition to being explored as a moderator of the stressor – strain relationship, detachment has also been examined as a mediator of this process. Specifically, detachment (or rather, a lack thereof) has been hypothesized as a mechanism through which job stressors are associated with strain outcomes. When work stress is high, it often becomes more difficult for employees to mentally distance themselves from work, which is then manifested in a
lack of detachment, ruminating about the work stressor, or engaging in work activities outside of work in order to address the stressor. Fewer studies have explicitly examined detachment as a mediator of this process, though early studies indicate some support for this relationship. For example, detachment partially mediates the association between the job stressors of workload and emotional dissonance and the strain outcomes of exhaustion and need for recovery (see Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015 for a review). Others have found that detachment mediated the relationship between job demands (time pressure, decision-making demands, and work hours) and fatigue at work (Kinnunen et al., 2011). More recently, detachment was shown to mediate the association between workplace aggression and work-family conflict (Demskey et al., 2014).

Though the previously summarized studies utilized cross-sectional designs, similar findings have emerged in longitudinal designs. A lack of withdrawal from work was found to partially mediate the association between job demands and the strain outcomes of a decreased sense of recovery and increased fatigue over a six-month time lag. Similarly, a recent study of church ministers demonstrates negative effects of a strong work calling on evening detachment via increased work hours (Clinton, Conway, & Sturges, 2016). One daily-diary study found that detachment mediated work activities in the evening and reduced vigor the following morning (see Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015 for a review). Detachment has also been shown to mediate the relationship between daily social stressors and objective sleep indicators, such that experiencing social stressors at work is associated with reduced detachment, which is in turn associated with poorer sleep (Pereira & Elfering, 2014). On a more positive note, daily experiences of mindfulness at work have been associated with increased detachment, and in turn improved sleep quality (Hülsheger et al., 2014).

**Intervention Research**
A limited number of studies have reported on intervention efforts targeted at increasing detachment levels. Generally, these interventions include a classroom component, in which participants are taught the various recovery experiences and provided with information on the beneficial effects of recovery from work. Hahn and colleagues (2011) reported on one such study, and found that detachment increased one week after the training. Further, recovery-related self-efficacy and sleep quality increased at one-week and three-week follow-ups, while perceived stress and state negative affect decreased at the three-week follow-up. Similarly, Ebert and colleagues (2015) found positive effects of a randomized controlled trial recovery intervention on insomnia severity, through increases in recovery activities, reduction in perseverative cognitions, and increased sleep effort.

More recently, the effects of mindfulness interventions on detachment have been examined, with mixed findings. One mindfulness intervention with a specific module on the importance of detachment found a significant increase in detachment for those in the experimental condition (Michel et al., 2014), while a low-dose mindfulness intervention without such a component failed to find a significant increase in detachment (Hülsheger, Feinholdt, & Nübold, 2015). Including a component specifically designed to improve detachment may improve the likelihood of seeing positive effects on this particular recovery experience.

Discussion

Practical implications. Research has demonstrated a number of positive associations between detachment and employee well-being, and has also linked detachment with improved work performance. As a result, several practical implications can be drawn from this work (see Fritz et al., 2013 for one such practitioner-oriented review). As reviewed above, interventions focused on increasing detachment could be one cost-effective way of improving employee well-
being and reducing employee healthcare costs. These interventions can draw on previously published work by Hahn et al. (2011) and Ebert et al. (2015) to develop cost-effective materials for employees and employers alike.

In addition to workplace interventions, there are also management practices that can be implemented to promote employee detachment, such as creating a climate of detachment, in which employees and supervisors avoid sending work-related messages outside of work hours. As a particularly salient example of this, France recently introduced legislation to encourage companies to establish policies that limit the spillover of work into employees’ private lives (Mosbergen, 2016). Another important work practice likely to benefit employees’ detachment levels is to encourage workers to use their vacation time. Recent research has indicated that U.S. employees only take 16.2 days of vacation on average per year, down from 20.3 days on average between 1978 and 2000 (Project: Time Off, 2016). Nearly 55% of employees surveyed reported leaving vacation days unused. Constant connectivity to the office via smartphones and work email may make it difficult to take vacation. Knowing that they may return to more work than they are leaving may also discourage employees from taking vacation days. Employers can encourage employees to take vacation days by making them easier to use, serving as role models, and enacting job-sharing programs while vacationing employees are away, so that they return from vacation to a reasonable amount of work.

Future research directions. There are several areas to consider for future research on detachment, some of which include further exploring the role of personality in detachment; the increased use of within-person designs to examine daily and momentary fluctuations in detachment; examining the association between detachment and objective health measures such
as blood pressure and cortisol; and conducting further intervention and experimental studies aimed at increasing detachment.

As this entry has illuminated, there has been little work examining the role of individual differences in detachment. While research has found limited associations between the Big Five, negative affect, action-state orientation, attachment avoidance and detachment, it is possible that personality may serve as a moderator of the associations between detachment and certain performance or well-being outcomes. For example, those high in neuroticism may be less likely to experience the beneficial effects of detachment.

While more recent research on the role of detachment has focused on within-person associations, additional day-level research is needed to disentangle the associations between workplace stressors and resources, detachment from work, and employee well-being and performance. Specifically, much of this research to date has examined the depleting role of workplace stressors as precursors to reduced detachment, while far fewer studies have examined the positive effects of workplace experiences such as mindfulness and flow on evening detachment levels.

Further, much of the work on detachment to date has focused on self-report measures of employee experiences, recovery activities, and well-being. While at least one study has examined associations between detachment and objective sleep indicators (i.e., measured via actigraphy; Pereira & Elfering, 2014), more work utilizing objective health measures would help to triangulate current findings on the association between detachment and well-being. For example, examining other objective indicators such as blood pressure or cortisol could begin to illuminate the underlying mechanisms through which detachment is associated with employee well-being.
Lastly, as the preceding section highlights, there are still few studies examining the effectiveness of interventions on detachment levels. While initial findings seem to support the effectiveness of interventions, field experiments would be beneficial for testing these effects in the workplace. It may also be worthwhile to conduct experimental studies in an effort to identify effective ways of manipulating detachment levels.

**Conclusion**

Detachment refers to a particular recovery experience characterized by a mental and physical separation from work. Certain work-related variables including time pressure, workload, and negative social interactions have been associated with lower levels of detachment. In general, research provides support for the beneficial effects of detachment, including improved well-being and performance. Such research has included limited intervention studies, with stronger support found for interventions that include a detachment-specific component. While most research on detachment has focused on identifying antecedents and outcomes, as well as understanding the role of detachment as a mediator or moderator, several areas for future research remain, including further exploring the role of personality in detachment and advancing the methodologies used to collect data on detachment.

**Cross-References** Personality and Subjective Well-Being; Economics and Well-Being; Personality and Physical Health
References


http://www.projecttimeoff.com/sites/default/files/PTO_SoAV%20Report_FINAL.pdf


