

Emotional Saturation as a Threshold State in Organizational Contexts: Integrating Resource-Based and Relational Approaches

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Abstract

Contemporary research in organizational behavior has devoted considerable attention to the role of emotions in professional life, particularly through the constructs of emotional intelligence and psychological capital as drivers of employee performance (Manafi, Hojabri & Rostomyan, 2025). Yet existing approaches focus primarily on adaptive resources and pay far less attention to the limits of emotional processing capacity. This article proposes a conceptualization of emotional saturation as a distinct threshold state that arises when an individual's capacity to process and regulate incoming emotional demands is exceeded. Drawing on qualitative analysis, four interrelated dimensions are identified: affective overload, emotional blunting, cognitive impairment, and regulatory breakdown. A relational and configurational interpretation of this state is proposed, distinguishing it from adjacent constructs such as stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. The article contributes to the theory of emotions in organizations by arguing for a shift from resource-based to threshold-based models of emotional functioning.

Keywords: *Emotional Saturation, Threshold State, Organizational Behavior, Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Capital, Self-Regulation, Burnout, Relational Approach*

1. Introduction

In contemporary organizations, emotional demands have long ceased to be episodic. Team management, customer service, education, healthcare, project work; across all these contexts, employees continuously attend to the emotional states of others, suppress their own reactions, navigate competing demands, and are expected to remain functional throughout. Emotional processing has become a structural feature of work, not an occasional add-on.

Organizations are reasonably effective at recognizing the already-formed consequences of this load: declining productivity, rising conflict, burnout, and staff turnover. What is far less well diagnosed is what happens earlier, the moment when an employee is still performing their functions, but the volume and continuity of emotional demands have already begun to exceed their capacity to process and regulate them. It is in this zone that the first signs of deterioration emerge, in cognitive clarity, emotional responsiveness, and self-regulation, before they are recognized as a problem.

Existing research concentrates on adaptive resources, primarily emotional intelligence and psychological capital as factors supporting employee effectiveness under load (Manafi et al., 2025). This is a productive focus. What it describes, however, is the system's capacity to cope with demands, and it is far less informative about the limits of that capacity.

This question takes on particular significance within the logic of RTDAS v1.1, where saturation is not inferred automatically from the presence of load or observable dysfunction, but requires a separate analytical identification as a distinct system state (Mazurkevych & Samoylenko, 2026). As demonstrated in a published study of the B2B SaaS market, superficially similar negative effects should not be automatically interpreted as saturation without distinguishing between surface-level manifestations and underlying mechanisms. The presence of overload does not itself prove that the system is in a saturation state. The same logic applies here: at what point does emotional demand cease to be merely high and instead shift the system into a qualitatively different mode of functioning?

Existing constructs - stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout - do not fully answer this question. Stress is too broad and theoretically heterogeneous (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Emotional exhaustion captures one dimension of overload (Maslach et al., 2016). Burnout describes an already-established, later-stage condition with pronounced consequences for an individual's relationship with their work (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Between adaptive emotional processing and these states lies a theoretically underspecified zone, a threshold transition that has no construct of its own.

In this article, that construct is emotional saturation. It is not simply a high intensity of experience, nor a collection of discrete symptoms, but a threshold state that emerges when the emotional stream begins to exceed the system's processing and regulatory capacity. Within the broader Theory of Saturation, emotional saturation is conceptualized as one of the distinct forms of saturation defined by Manafi (2025, 2026). In this state, it is not only subjective emotional comfort that is disrupted, but the structure of functioning itself: emotional responsiveness diminishes, cognitive processing deteriorates, and behavioral regulation weakens. Qualitative analysis identifies four interrelated dimensions of this state: affective overload, emotional blunting, cognitive impairment, and regulatory breakdown.

Conceptually, the article draws on a relational approach: the state under analysis is understood not as an isolated internal symptom, but as a state arising at the intersection of environmental emotional demands, the individual's internal resources, and self-regulatory mechanisms (Mazurkevych & Samoylenko, 2026).

The article addresses two related challenges. The practical one: the need for earlier detection of disruptions in emotional functioning before they materialize as errors, conflicts, or burnout. The theoretical one: the need to supplement resource-based models with a threshold model capable of describing the state in which emotional processing capacity is exceeded.

The article proceeds as follows: it reviews existing resource-based approaches, argues for the need to introduce the construct of emotional saturation, proposes its relational conceptualization, describes the identified dimensions, and develops a preliminary model for subsequent empirical testing.

2. Theoretical Background: From Resource-Based to Threshold Models

2.1. Emotional Resources and Adaptive Functioning

In organizational behavior research, emotions have traditionally been analyzed through the lens of adaptive resources. Central to this logic are emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological capital (PsyCap), key personal resources that support effective functioning under demanding conditions (Manafi et al., 2025).

Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to perceive, understand, use, and regulate one's own emotions and the emotions of others (Côté, 2014). In organizational settings, high EI is associated with greater social accuracy, more effective management of emotional reactions, improved conflict resolution, and the maintenance of constructive interaction. Empirical meta-analyses demonstrate that EI is positively related to job performance, leadership effectiveness, and reduced turnover (O'Boyle et al., 2011).

Psychological capital, introduced by Luthans and colleagues, comprises four components: self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007). PsyCap is treated as a developable state rather than a fixed trait, which makes it particularly relevant to organizational analysis. Together, EI and PsyCap form a resource-based model of emotional functioning, embedded in broader theoretical frameworks (the Job Demands) Resources model (JD-R) and Conservation of Resources theory (COR) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hobfoll, 1989).

According to JD-R, personal resources help employees meet work goals and reduce the psychological costs of high demands (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2023). COR holds that people seek to acquire, protect, and build resources, and that having them prevents the formation of negative spirals (Hobfoll, 1989). Within this logic, emotional resources function as buffers that attenuate the impact of workplace demands.

This perspective has been highly productive in explaining variability in individual effectiveness and the quality of interpersonal interaction. Its focus, however, remains on how the system functions under load, not on what happens when load begins to exceed the processing capacity of available resources. The resource model is, by its internal logic, continuous: it assumes quantitative changes, more or fewer resources, higher or lower resilience, but does not anticipate a qualitative shift to a different system state.

2.2. The Limits of the Resource Approach

The central limitation of the resource model is this: it assumes that increasing resources compensates for increasing demands, but it does not offer a clear account of where that compensation reaches its limits.

In empirical studies, deterioration is typically captured in already-formed states: chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout (Alarcon, 2011) without explicitly distinguishing the transition from adaptive processing to its breakdown. Attention shifts either to antecedents (high demands, emotional labor) or to outcomes (performance decline, disengagement, turnover) (Jeung et al., 2018). The transition process itself remains theoretically underspecified.

The existing constructs of EI and PsyCap do not always allow for the differentiation of qualitatively distinct functioning modes. High load may be accompanied by successful resource mobilization and sustained, or even enhanced, performance, or by a gradual decline in cognitive clarity and regulatory capacity. Within a resource-based logic, these differences are reduced to quantitative measurement, whereas in practice the question may be one of a qualitative shift to a different state.

Even COR only partially addresses this problem. The concept of a loss spiral captures the accumulation of resource losses, but the process is framed as resource depletion dynamics rather than as a transition to a qualitatively different state (Hobfoll, 1989). The resource approach works well for explaining adaptation within the normal range but is far less effective at capturing the critical moment when emotional processing ceases to be sustainable.

This calls for supplementing the resource model with a theoretical framework capable of describing not only the level of available resources, but also threshold transitions beyond which the system loses stable emotional functioning.

2.3. Relational Logic: Distinguishing Load, Manifestation, and State

The relational approach proposes abandoning the automatic identification of load, symptoms, and system state. Incoming demands, external manifestations, and the internal mode of functioning are treated as analytically distinct levels (Mazurkevych & Samoylenko, 2026).

This distinction is especially important in cases where superficially similar effects may stem from different mechanisms. High load, declining decision quality, reduced emotional responsiveness, none of these, by themselves, allow a definitive determination of what state the system is in. They may reflect temporary overload, resource depletion, contextual factors, or a transition to a qualitatively different state. The presence of negative effects does not prove saturation: such a state must be conceptually identified separately.

The relational approach shifts the focus from individual symptoms to the structure of their relationships. Environmental emotional demands are treated as an incoming stream, and the individual's state is understood as the result of the interaction between that stream and their processing capacity, regulatory mechanisms, and context. What matters is not the absolute volume of load, but how it relates to the system's capacity to process it and maintain functioning.

This allows for nonlinearity. Up to a certain point, the system sustains stability by compensating for load through resources and support. Once the threshold is crossed, the nature of functioning changes: the system continues to face similar demands but processes them by a different logic. This is the theoretical significance of distinguishing load as input from state as mode of functioning.

2.4. Emotional Saturation as a Threshold and Configurational State

Considering the limitations outlined above, this article proposes a shift from a resource-based to a threshold model. The emotional processing system has a finite processing capacity, shaped by the combination of individual resources, contextual conditions, and self-regulatory mechanisms. Below a critical level, the emotional stream is processed adaptively. Once that threshold is exceeded, the change is not merely quantitative, the system transitions to a qualitatively different state.

That state is designated here as emotional saturation, a threshold state that arises when the volume, intensity, or continuity of emotional demands begins to exceed the individual's capacity to process and regulate them. The key point is that this is not a single emotion, nor a transient sense of fatigue, but a shift in the mode of emotional functioning.

Emotional saturation cannot be reduced to a single symptom. It cannot be adequately described through irritability, emotional fatigue, or reduced empathy alone. Rather, it is a configurational state in which changes across the affective, cognitive, and regulatory domains are interrelated and form a reproducible structure.

This enables a differentiation from adjacent constructs. Unlike stress, emotional saturation points not simply to tension but to a breakdown in processing capacity (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Unlike emotional exhaustion, it is not limited to an energy deficit (Maslach et al., 2016). Unlike burnout, it identifies an earlier level of disruption, one that precedes established professional maladaptation (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Hadžibajramović et al., 2020). In this way, emotional saturation fills a meaningful theoretical gap between adaptive emotional functioning and the already-formed states of exhaustion and burnout.

3. Structural Dimensions of Emotional Saturation

Recent work by Manafi and colleagues (2026) has further advanced the conceptualization of Emotional Saturation by identifying four core dimensions: Affective Overload, Emotional Attenuation, Cognitive Disruption, and Regulatory Breakdown. Each dimension is supported by specific subdimensions that capture its underlying mechanisms, including Perceived Emotional Intensity and Emotional Accumulation (Affective Overload), Emotional Numbing and Reduced Empathic Engagement (Emotional Attenuation),

Attentional Disruption and Impaired Cognitive Clarity (Cognitive Disruption), as well as Loss of Emotional Control and Impulsive Emotional Expression (Regulatory Breakdown).

3.1. The Affective Component: Disruption of Emotional Modulation

The first-dimension concerns transformations in the affective domain. In a state of saturation, what changes is not so much the content of emotions as the system's capacity for adaptive emotional modulation.

These changes manifest in two forms that appear, at first glance, to be opposites: heightened reactivity and reduced sensitivity. On one side, increased irritability, a lower response threshold, and intensified negative affect (anger, anxiety, frustration), such that even neutral events are perceived as significant or threatening (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). On the other, emotional blunting: reduced empathy, diminished capacity to experience positive emotions, and a subjective sense of emotional emptiness (Maslach et al., 2016).

These manifestations are not mutually exclusive: they may coexist or alternate depending on context, reflecting not a difference in states but a unified destabilization of the regulatory system. The key indicator is not a particular type of reaction, but the loss of flexibility, an inability to adequately calibrate the intensity and quality of the emotional response.

In organizational settings, this appears as declining quality of interpersonal interaction, increasing conflict, and elements of depersonalization, for example, a cynical attitude toward clients or colleagues (Jeung et al., 2018). It is the loss of adaptive modulation, rather than the mere presence of negative emotions, that signals the system's transition to a qualitatively different mode of functioning.

3.2. The Cognitive Component: Reduced Processing Capacity

The second dimension concerns the cognitive domain. Where the affective component involves disrupted emotional modulation, the cognitive component centers on a weakening of the system's ability to sustain clarity and precision in information processing.

At the empirical level, this manifests as impaired concentration, a higher rate of decision-making errors, difficulty holding multiple elements of information simultaneously, and a reduced ability to distinguish between what is relevant and what is not (Hadžibajramović et al., 2020). The employee finds it harder to maintain causal reasoning, loses the thread of a task more quickly, and increasingly relies on simplified interpretive schemas. This is especially evident in work that demands cognitive precision: analytical tasks, negotiations, project management, and decision-making under uncertainty.

These changes should not be reduced to ordinary fatigue. Within the proposed model, they are part of a configuration that emerges after the system crosses a threshold. Below the threshold, high load may produce tension without disrupting the internal logic of information processing. Once the threshold is crossed, the cognitive system no longer operates in its previous mode (Demerouti et al., 2023).

From a relational perspective, the incoming stream of emotional stimuli begins to occupy a disproportionately large share of processing capacity. But this is not simply a matter of quantitative reallocation of resources between emotion and cognition, the logic of cognitive work itself changes. The system shifts from a mode of deep, sequential, context-sensitive processing to one of compressed responding, where priority is given to speed and the immediate reduction of internal tension.

This is why states of emotional saturation produce seemingly contradictory effects: cognitive slowing coexists with hasty decision-making. On the one hand, it becomes harder to hold a complex task, maintain

priorities, and process large bodies of information. On the other, there is an increased tendency toward quick but less accurate judgments and premature closure of the cognitive process. This combination undermines not only efficiency but the quality of managerial and professional action.

3.3. The Regulatory Component: Loss of Flexible Control

The third-dimension concerns self-regulatory mechanisms. Where the affective component describes changes in emotional response, and the cognitive component describes disruptions in information processing, the regulatory component points to a deeper level: the system becomes harder to hold in an organized, directed, and adaptive mode.

At the behavioral level, this appears as impulsivity, reduced capacity to suppress unwanted reactions, loss of sequential action, and difficulty shifting between tasks (Baumeister et al., 2007). What is central, however, is not the list of symptoms but the change in the quality of the regulatory function itself: the system loses not merely a portion of its regulatory resources, but the capacity to flexibly calibrate responses in line with context and goals.

Flexibility is the key. Under normal conditions, self-regulation involves the ability to choose among strategies, align short-term reactions with long-term goals, and adjust behavior without disrupting overall functioning (Guan et al., 2020; Geisler et al., 2019). In a state of saturation, this capacity weakens: the individual either reacts too quickly and disproportionately or becomes locked in rigid and no longer effective patterns.

The regulatory component serves a structuring function within the overall configuration. If regulatory mechanisms retain their flexibility, the system can compensate for affective spikes and cognitive overload. Once the regulatory function weakens, the scope for such compensation shrinks sharply. Affective fluctuations intensify control difficulties; regulatory weakness impairs cognitive functioning; and cognitive constraints, in turn, further narrow the range of available strategies.

The connection to emotion regulation research is particularly instructive here. The distinction between reappraisal and suppression traditionally describes different ways of working with emotions (Geisler et al., 2019). Under saturation, however, the question shifts: does the system retain the capacity to select and implement strategies flexibly and in a timely way? As saturation intensifies, the space for such choice narrows, responses become either automatically suppressive or poorly controlled. Regulatory breakdown is not simply an ineffective strategy; it is a disruption at the meta-level where strategies are selected and adjusted in the first place (Baumeister et al., 2007).

3.4. Configuration and the Threshold Transition

The affective, cognitive, and regulatory components should not be treated as independent disruptions. The theoretical value of the construct lies precisely in its capacity to describe them as an interconnected configuration that emerges once the processing threshold has been crossed.

Affective destabilization alters the way situations are perceived, intensifying cognitive overload. Cognitive limitations impair regulatory capacity, the ability to distinguish relevant from irrelevant deteriorates, goal maintenance weakens, and planning of responses becomes less reliable. Weakened regulation amplifies both affective fluctuations and cognitive instability, as the system becomes progressively less able to compensate for incoming demands and increasingly acts either impulsively or rigidly. The components are not mechanically linked but connected through a mutual reinforcement loop (Demerouti et al., 2023).

In the early stages, the system still exhibits partial compensation: the employee maintains formal performance despite growing irritability; holds externally acceptable behavior despite declining

concentration; sustains productivity at the cost of increasing regulatory effort. As load increases, however, the interaction among components begins to alter the character of functioning itself. What appeared as compensable disruptions becomes a stable structure in which the system operates by a different logic.

This is what distinguishes emotional saturation from ordinary high load. The threshold character of saturation means that what matters is not the absolute level of demands, but whether a stable configuration of interrelated changes emerges, one that signals a reorganization of the functioning mode. Saturation is therefore not identified by a single symptom, but by the transition from relatively independent fluctuations to an internally coherent structure of affective, cognitive, and regulatory disruption.

The configurational approach also has methodological implications. If saturation is not a single symptom but a stable structure of interrelated changes, its empirical measurement cannot be built as a simple sum of independent scales. It requires a logic that accounts for the co-occurrence and mutual reinforcement of components, multidimensional scales, latent profile analysis, cluster analysis, and related approaches.

4. Theoretical and Methodological Implications

4.1. Theoretical Contribution

The construct of emotional saturation contributes to organizational behavior research primarily by clarifying the nature of transitional states in emotional functioning. In contrast to resource-based models focused on the level of available resources (Manafi et al., 2025), the proposed conceptualization introduces a distinction between quantitative change and qualitative transition.

Emotional saturation fills a theoretical gap between adaptive functioning under high load and the later, more established states of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Maslach et al., 2016; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). It describes an earlier stage one that is already qualitatively distinct, in which the system loses its capacity for adaptive processing while remaining outwardly functional.

The key theoretical contribution is the introduction of threshold logic: changes in emotional functioning are understood not as linear deterioration with increasing demands, but as a transition between modes triggered by a specific configuration of conditions (Mazurkevych & Samoylenko, 2026). This accounts for the nonlinear character of many organizational processes, in which employee deterioration appears sudden despite the preceding accumulation of less visible changes.

4.2. Methodological Implications

The configurational and threshold character of the state means that conventional linear measurement models are limited in their ability to capture it. Most existing instruments are designed to measure individual variables and aggregate them, an approach that can identify levels of stress or exhaustion, but is largely insensitive to the transition between functioning modes (Hadžibajramović et al., 2020).

The proposed model points toward configurational approaches oriented to identifying stable combinations of indicators and their transitions. The present article does not aim to develop a final measurement model, its purpose is to establish the theoretical foundations for the subsequent operationalization of the construct.

4.3. Practical Implications

The configurational and threshold logic makes earlier detection of changes in emotional functioning possible. This is particularly important in contexts characterized by high emotional labor intensity, where employees may sustain external productivity for extended periods despite gradual internal deterioration (Jeung et al., 2018).

The proposed model shifts the focus from identifying already-established states to detecting early signs of transition. This opens possibilities for more targeted interventions aimed not only at reducing load, but at restoring flexibility in the emotional and regulatory system through changes in organizational practice, task redistribution, and adjustments to emotional labor demands.

4.4. Proposed Framework Directions for Future Research

The proposed conceptualization opens several research directions. Most immediately, empirical testing of the construct's structure is needed: refining its component dimensions, the nature of relationships among them, and the conditions governing the transition between functioning modes.

Of particular importance is the development of a quantitative model capable of operationalizing emotional saturation in measurable terms. Promising approaches include latent profile analysis, cluster analysis, and other methods oriented toward identifying types of states. See Figure 1.

An equally important direction involves examining the factors that contribute to the development of saturation both individual factors (EI, PsyCap) and organizational ones (demand levels, the nature of emotional labor, interaction culture) (Manafi et al., 2025; Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2023). Finally, the consequences of emotional saturation require examination: its relationship to burnout, performance, interaction quality, and employees' long-term well-being.

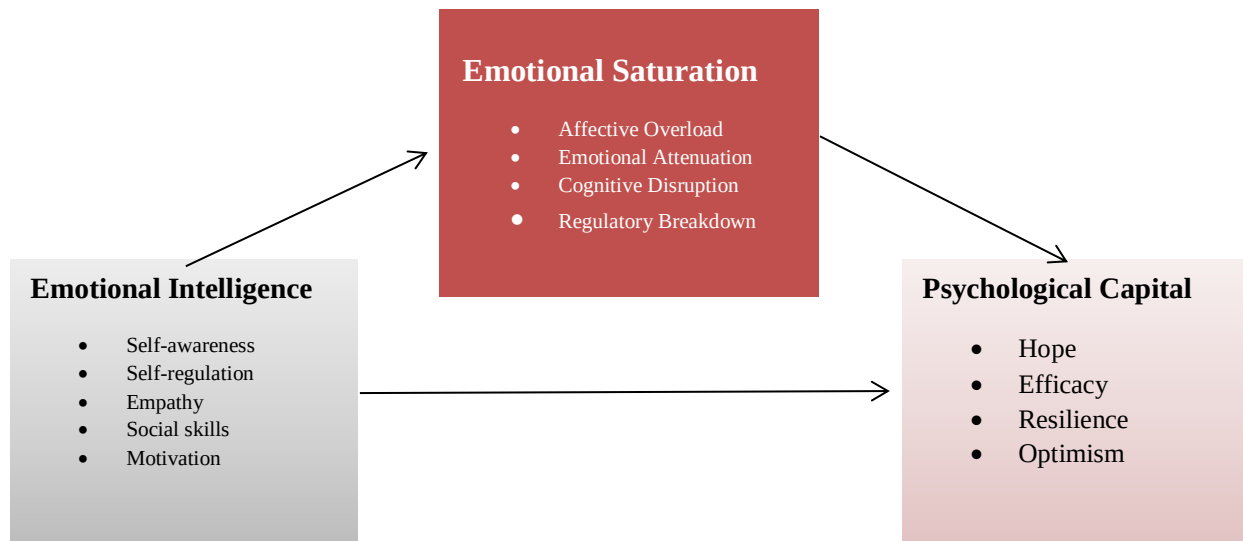


Figure 1. Proposed Framework of the Study

5. Conclusion

This article has proposed a conceptualization of emotional saturation as a distinct threshold state in organizational contexts. In contrast to approaches focused on emotional resources or already-established states of distress, the proposed model describes a transitional mode in which the emotional stream begins to exceed the system's processing and regulatory capacity.

The theoretical contribution rests on three interrelated propositions. First, a construct is introduced that fills the gap between resource-based models and the later states of exhaustion and burnout. Second, a threshold logic of analysis is proposed that distinguishes between linear deterioration and qualitative transition. Third, emotional saturation is described as a configurational state comprising affective, cognitive, and regulatory components that are interrelated within a unified structure.

The practical significance of the work lies in the possibility of earlier, more precise detection of disruptions in emotional functioning before they materialize as errors, conflicts, or burnout. The proposed model shifts the focus from already-formed consequences to earlier stages of transition, providing a basis for timely intervention in settings with high emotional labor intensity.

The present article is conceptual in nature and makes no claim to a completed empirical operationalization. Its aim is to establish a theoretical foundation for the next stage of research, oriented toward developing and quantitatively testing a framework of emotional saturation.

Emotional saturation is not a variant of already-known states, but a distinct object of analysis, one that is necessary for a more precise understanding of the limits of emotional functioning in the contemporary organization.

Declaration of AI Assistance: *We hereby declare that artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT by OpenAI) were used solely for language editing and refinement of this article. The content, ideas, and analysis were developed by the author, while AI assistance was limited to improving clarity, grammar, and style.*

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Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Manafi Institute for Saturation Studies (MISS).