RESEARCH PROBLEM AND DATA
The conventional buffering hypothesis has a long history that dates back to Karasek’s original formulation of the job demands–control (JD-C) model. While the JD-C and the more recent job demands–resources models have been highly influential in work-stress research, theoretical development and empirical evaluation across dimensions of stratification have been limited. Much prior research assumes that the predictions of the buffering hypothesis generalize across levels of socioeconomic status (SES)—that is, lower and higher SES workers should experience similar mental health “returns” from job resources. We propose potential SES-based differences in those returns.

We use data from the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce—a nationally representative sample of the American workforce. Using robust regression, we first tested the conventional buffering hypothesis by evaluating whether job autonomy and challenging work attenuate the positive relationship between job pressure and two mental health–related outcomes: anxiety and job dissatisfaction. Next, we examined whether two key markers of socioeconomic position—income and education—moderate the two-way interactions between job pressure and job resources. All analyses controlled for a wide range of important sociodemographic variables.

KEY FINDINGS
- Job autonomy and challenging work attenuated the positive association between job pressure and job dissatisfaction, but did not moderate the association between job pressure and anxiety.
- Education and income are additional contingencies that elaborate on the two-way buffering effects—but only when anxiety is the outcome.
- While the buffering potency of job autonomy and challenging work is evident among workers with lower SES, these same job-related resources amplify the positive association between job pressure and anxiety for workers with higher SES.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS
Initiatives and interventions aimed at reducing the mental health impact of job pressures for lower SES individuals should continue to emphasize beneficial dimensions of job control. The patterns observed for higher SES workers suggest that work intensification and excessive workload undermine the “control” dimension of job autonomy and the “rewarding” and “stimulating” aspects of challenging work. These dynamics, coupled with an increase in the use of communication technologies, render some workers particularly vulnerable in high pressure/high control contexts. We offer two recommendations: (1) Assess and modify the organizational conditions that produce discrepancies between the quantity of work required and the time allotted, and (2) in high-pressured contexts, guard against the possibility that some “resources” might produce over-paced workers by intensifying pressures and blurring work-life boundaries.

Figure 1. Job Autonomy as a Moderator of the Relationship between Job Pressure and Anxiety at Lower versus Higher Levels of Education.

Figure 2. Job Autonomy as a Moderator of the Relationship between Job Pressure and Anxiety at Lower versus Higher Levels of Income.