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Commentary

Work engagement: On how to better catch a slippery concept

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In our response to the lead article (Bakker, Leiter, & Albrecht, 2011 this issue), we focus on five conceptual issues in order to better catch the slippery concept of work engagement: (1) “What’s in the name” of engagement? (2) What is its relationship with burnout? (3) How to differentiate work engagement from task engagement? (4) How to distinguish between collective and individual work engagement? (5) What are the dark sides of work engagement? In doing so, we hope to contribute to a better conceptualization of work engagement and to a more fruitful future research agenda.

We would like to applaud the attempt of Bakker, Leiter, and Albrecht (2011 this issue) to draft a future research agenda (*Where do we go?*) based on our current knowledge on work engagement (*What do we know?*). Since on many occasions we collaborated on the subject with the authors, we basically agree with much of what they wrote in their lead article. But not with all. In our reply, we focus on five conceptual issues that remained unclear to us and make some suggestions to establish a less slippery and more sound, solid, and scientific notion of work engagement.

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(1) WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Engagement is very popular, particularly in business and consultancy. For instance, a Google search (June, 2010) reveals 640,000 hits for “employee engagement” and 35,500 hits for “work engagement”. This is a relatively high score, compared to “only” 67,900 hits for “job burnout”, 24,700 for “professional burnout”, and 7,450 for “occupational burnout”, respectively. That is remarkable because burnout was introduced in the mid-1970s, about 25 years earlier than engagement. Interestingly, it seems that the term “employee engagement” is more popular in business, whereas in academia “work engagement” is preferred. This is illustrated by *PsycINFO*, the leading database of academic publications in psychology, which includes (June 2010) 96 publications on “employee engagement” and 134 on “work engagement”, whereas the former yields 640,000 Google hits against only 35,000 for the latter. That means that each scientific article on “employee engagement” in *PsycINFO* corresponds with 6,666 Google hits, whereas each paper on “work engagement” corresponds with only 261 hits.

But what is more, it also seems that both terms refer to different things. When drafting a research agenda on a relevant topic for organizations, it is of great importance to define the focal construct properly, and this is what we miss that in the lead article. Instead of discussing work engagement from a conceptual point of view, Bakker et al. (2011 this issue) propose quite uncritically and without justification the definition of work engagement as implied by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). We admit that the UWES is the most popular instrument (i.e., 83% of the *PsycINFO* articles use this questionnaire), but why select this as *the* definition of work engagement? In doing so, an *operational* rather than a *conceptual* definition is proposed. And why choose a definition for the term “work engagement” and not for “employee engagement”?

We believe that there is a good conceptual reason for preferring work engagement over employee engagement. The former refers to the relationship of the employee with his or her *work*. In contrast, employee engagement is a broader concept and may also include the relationship with the employee's professional or occupational *role* and with his or her *organization*. Most likely, this is exactly why employee engagement is so popular in business and consultancy. In short, we consider it a serious restriction that the term “work engagement” is not properly conceptualized in the lead article (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue) and that it is narrowed down to the operational definition that underlies the most popular assessment tool.

(2) WORK ENGAGEMENT AND BURNOUT: TWO DIFFERENT COINS!

Given the operational definition of work engagement as implied by the UWES, we agree with the lead article that vigour and dedication constitute its core dimensions. The theoretical rationale—not mentioned by Bakker et al. (2011 this issue), by the way—is that UWES-work engagement is defined as the opposite of burnout. And since burnout reflects both the incapacity (exhaustion) as well as the unwillingness (withdrawal) to perform at work (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005), it logically follows that work engagement is characterized by capability (energy or vigour) and willingness (involvement or dedication). Furthermore, empirical work seems to confirm the divergent role of the third dimension of work engagement—absorption (e.g., Salanova, Llorens, Cifre, Martínez, & Schaufeli, 2003; Schaufeli, Taris, & van Rhenen, 2008). So far so good.

However, we believe that it is not a good idea to use the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) or the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) as alternative measures of work engagement. The point is that both questionnaires assume that burnout and work engagement are each other's *perfect counterparts*. This means that low scores on the MBI or the OLBI are considered to be equivalent with high scores on work engagement, and vice versa. From a psychological perspective, the assumption of a perfectly inverse relationship of burnout and work engagement is not feasible, though. Namely, not feeling burned-out doesn't necessarily mean that one feels engaged, and not feeling engaged doesn't necessarily mean that one is burned-out. In fact, engagement and burnout may co-occur, at least to some extent. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis showed that correlations between work engagement and burnout range from $-.24$ to $-.65$, depending on the dimensions involved (Halbesleben, 2010). Tellingly, this is much less than -1.0 , which would result when both were perfect counterparts. It follows that burnout and engagement should be measured independently, just as is the case for positive and negative affect (Segura & González-Romá, 2003). When burnout and work engagement are assessed independently intriguing research questions emerge that—by definition—cannot be investigated when both would be assessed by the same instrument. For instance, do work engagement and burnout have different consequences and antecedents? Can the incremental validity of work engagement over and above burnout be demonstrated? By the way, the answer on both questions seems to be “yes”, but that is another story (see Schaufeli & Salanova, 2008, and Schaufeli, 2009, respectively).

(3) WORK ENGAGEMENT AND TASK ENGAGEMENT: TWO DIFFERENT CONCEPTS

It is certainly a step forward to study work engagement at the daily level using diaries and within-group designs. In that way, its temporal and dynamic nature can be investigated and, for instance, gain spirals of resources, work engagement, and performance may be uncovered (Salanova, Schaufeli, Xantopoulou & Bakker, 2010). Thus, we agree with Proposition 3 of Bakker et al. (2011 this issue), which states that conceptualizations and measures of work engagement are needed that consider the dynamic and temporal nature of the construct. However, often—as in the lead article—the terms “state engagement” and “trait engagement” are used for work engagement at the within-level and between-level of analysis, respectively. From a conceptual point of view “day-level work engagement” and “habitual work engagement” would be more appropriate labels. Namely, the dichotomy trait-state suggests that work engagement is (also) a dispositional personality trait. Instead, habitual work engagement refers to an affective-cognitive state that is relatively stable across time but is nevertheless influenced by work characteristics.

Having said this, we would like to go one step beyond and propose that in addition to habitual work engagement and day-level work engagement—which both focus on work, albeit from a different time perspective—we need to conceptualize *task* engagement as well. In other words, the object of engagement may be the job in general (habitual work engagement), the particular work-day (day-level work engagement), or the task at hand (task engagement). Jobs consist of several tasks, and employees might feel more engaged while performing some tasks rather than other tasks. Hence, the study of task engagement would allow a more fine-grained analysis of the specific tasks that constitute jobs. Of course, this can be done at the day-level as well; for instance by assessing levels of task engagement using multiple time samples during the day. Recently, Rodríguez, Schaufeli, Salanova, Cifre, and Sonnenschein (in press) used an Experienced Sampling Method with electronic devices and found that levels of “flow” (operationalized by two absorption items of the UWES), were highest for activities performed in the early morning and in the evening, with the lowest levels for activities between 14 and 16 hours. Furthermore, laboratory studies showed that task engagement is positively related to the individual’s task resources (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007), and that team-level task engagement is reciprocally related to efficacy beliefs and positive affect at the collective level, thus suggesting a dynamic gain spiral over time (Salanova, Llorens, & Schaufeli, in press). In short, adding the task-level to the engagement concept opens another intriguing avenue for research.

(4) COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL WORK ENGAGEMENT: TWO DIFFERENT LEVELS

Indeed, as the study of Salanova, Agut, and Peiró (2005) illustrates, work engagement may be conceived as a collective, team-level experience as well. Hence—as stated in the lead article (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue)—“climate for engagement” looks to be a promising future avenue for research. However, we would like to make two critical remarks about the way climate for engagement is conceptualized by Bakker et al.

First, it seems somewhat awkward to operationalize climate for engagement using the six areas of work life (Leiter & Maslach, 1999) and try to differentiate these six areas from job demands and resources. The reason is that the six areas and the job demands/resources refer to the same constructs, albeit that they are measured at different aggregation levels: climate or the six areas at the group level, and job demands/resources at the individual level. As a matter of fact, the six areas of work life refer either to job demands (i.e., workload), to job resources (i.e., control, reward, community, fairness), or to personal resources (i.e., values). Using the areas of work life at the collective level to investigate their impact on job demands and job resources, and work engagement—measured at the individual level—is tautological. Instead, it would be more adequate to use multilevel analyses to assess the impact of climate for engagement (using the six areas of work life at the *collective* level) on individual perceptions of this climate for engagement and work engagement at the *individual* level. However, the climate for engagement that the authors propose boils down to job demands and resources (workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values) but it is called areas of work life and aggregated at the collective level.

Second, although multilevel analysis is a very attractive technique to study how psychosocial constructs measured at group level could impact on constructs at the individual level, as proposed in the lead article (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue), the authors do not elaborate on research that includes constructs that are measured at the collective level. For example, climate and work unit engagement are collective constructs and, according to the compatibility principle (Ajzen, 2005), such collective constructs should be studied in relation to other collective constructs (i.e., team performance). In other words, the compatibility principle posits that both sides of the predictor–criterion equation must be operationalized at the same level of specificity. For example, Whitman, van Rooy, and Viswesvaran (2010) found that the relation between satisfaction and performance is stronger when both are assessed at the collective level (i.e., work unit, branch, or organization) instead of using the individual level of analysis. In a similar vein, Salanova et al. (2005) showed that climate for service at the team level

is related to work engagement at team level, and in turn, to work performance at team level.

In sum, our point is that: (1) a conceptual differentiation has to be made between individual and collective work engagement because both experiences are not equivalent from a psychological point of view; (2) work engagement should be assessed at the collective level as well, which implies a reference shift in the items (i.e. “Our team feels strong and vigorous” instead of “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”).

(5) BURNOUT AND WORKAHOLISM: TWO DARK SIDES OF WORK ENGAGEMENT?

We agree that, so far, the downside of work engagement has been under-researched. One of the most promising avenues is the relationship between work engagement and burnout. Of course, this relationship can only be studied when both are measured independently (see earlier). Given the very nature of work engagement, which is primarily characterized by energy and identification, it is plausible to assume that, in due course, energy may get exhausted and identification may turn into cynicism. In other words, under specific conditions, work engagement may lead to burnout, for instance, when the balance of give and take is disturbed. A series of studies from social exchange perspective showed that, over time, a lack of reciprocity might lead to burnout (Schaufeli, 2006). That is, when employees invest large amounts of effort and personal resources into their jobs without receiving appropriate outcomes (e.g., appreciation, possibilities to learn and develop, fringe benefits) they experience a lack of reciprocity and may therefore burn out. Because engaged employees—by definition—drive a lot of personal energies (physical, emotional, and mental) into their work role (Kahn, 1990), their balance of give and take is likely to be disturbed so they are in danger of burning out. Hence, longitudinal research, using a social exchange perspective may explain why and how work engagement may turn into burnout.

Bakker et al. (2011 this issue) point to another potential dark side of work engagement: “enduring work engagement may create workaholics” (p. 18). We do not agree with this. It is obvious that, like workaholics, work engaged employees work long hours and that this may lead to negative consequences such as work–family conflict. But in our view, working hard is not the same as being a workaholic. Spending a lot of hours working or thinking about work is a necessary but not sufficient condition for workaholism. In addition to working excessively, workaholics are characterized by *working compulsively*. As a matter of fact, it seems that this compulsive tendency is more toxic than working very hard (Schaufeli et al., 2008). But most importantly, it seems that the underlying motivational dynamics that are involved in work engagement and workaholism differ fundamentally (Taris, Schaufeli &

Shimazu, 2010). Whereas work-engaged employees are *pulled* to their work because for them work is fun, workaholics are *pushed* to their work because they cannot resist their compulsive work drive. Essentially, engaged employees feel fine when they work, whereas workaholics feel bad when they do *not*. In other words, the behaviour of engaged employees is driven by approach motivation and that of workaholics by avoidance motivation. Recent empirical evidence for such fundamental differences in underlying motivational systems comes from a study by van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris, and Schreurs (2010). They found that work engagement is primarily characterized by intrinsic motivation, whereas workaholism is primarily characterized by extrinsic motivation (i.e., the internalization of external standards of self-worth and social approval). Because of the fundamentally different motivational dynamics involved, it is highly unlikely that work engagement may “create” workaholism—or at least this assumption is rather preliminary.

CONCLUSION

The lead article (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue) certainly has its merits for stimulating research on work engagement. Yet, we believe that it falls short on a number of conceptual issues: (1) It uses an operational rather than a conceptual definition of engagement and thus it did not make clear “what’s in the name” of work engagement, for instance as distinguished from employee engagement; (2) rather than two sides of the same coin, work engagement and burnout are two different coins; (3) an additional differentiation between work engagement and task engagement seems feasible; (4) collective work engagement is more than the sum of individual work engagement; and (5) burnout and not workaholism is the dark side of work engagement. The lesson to be learned from these five issues is that, before embarking on yet another empirical study on work engagement, we should take a break, count to ten, and ponder about the very concept of work engagement and its vicissitudes.

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