



Editorial

Outlook Work Engagement in Contrast to Burnout: Real and Redundant!



Is work engagement a redundant concept that can be reduced to mere burnout, or is it an independent, ‘real’ construct in its own right? This is the key question that this special issue about burnout and work engagement sought to answer. Based on psychometric, theoretical, nomological, and longitudinal evidence that is presented in the previous five contributions the answer to this question seems clear. We agree with Leiter and Maslach who conclude: “*Perhaps the best way to characterize all of these results is to say that work engagement appears to be both “real and redundant.” It is negatively related to burnout (and thus is somewhat redundant), but it also has some unique other relationships (and thus is real). It is neither completely opposite, nor completely independent.*” So burnout and engagement constitute a dual unity; the glass is half full and half empty at the same time.

1. Dialectical perspective

At first glance this conclusion may sound somewhat disappointing, but it is not when it is framed within the dialectical perspective on burnout and engagement put forward by Leon, Halbesleben and Paustian-Underdahl (2015). In fact, these authors provide an epistemological basis for the “real and redundant” or “dual-unity” conclusion because they argue that the one cannot be seen without the other, meaning that burnout and work engagement implicate each other. The dialectical perspective integrates the “opposite poles” and “independent constructs” positions that are displayed in figure 1 in the introduction to this special issue. According to Leon et al. (2015) burnout and work engagement constitute a dialectical relationship of both independent and opposing forces that are mutually negating each other in a dynamic relationship that fluctuates with time. This implies that burnout and engagement are in a state of constant flux that results in unique outcomes. The authors write: “...combining complementary assumptions with ideas of mutual implication and polarization provide a platform by which burnout and engagement can co-exist within an individual while maintaining distinct properties that are independent, yet act upon, their opposites” (p. 90). This meshes not only with diary research that shows that levels of burnout and work engagement fluctuate within the span of a single work day (e.g. Bakker & Oerlemans, in press), but also with the findings of Mäkikangas, Hyvönen and Feldt in the current issue, who found that in some of their subgroups vigor and exhaustion fluctuated independently from each other across a time period of eight years. The dialectical perspective is also commensurate with the task-level approach of Sonnentag, who emphasizes that particularly work engagement fluctuates between different tasks, as well as with the meta-analytic, longitudinal analysis of Marcotou, Sulea and Iancu, who found reciprocal cross-lagged effects between burnout (exhaustion) and work engagement. Finally, using a similar overarching conceptual model, Goering and his colleagues as well as Taris, Ybema & Van Beek, showed that burnout and work engagement are negatively related, but yet exhibit different patterns of relationships with job demands, job resources and various outcomes. So it seems that all contributions to this special issue agree, in one way or another, with a dialectical perspective on burnout and work engagement. In essence this means that, although both are distinct entities, they can only be fully understood in relation to each other. In other words, burnout and work engagement constitute a dual unity.

2. Burnout and work engagement as scientific challenge

Given this dialectical perspective on burnout and engagement, Leiter and Maslach’s call in this special issue for a more nuanced approach that includes all subscales of the MBI and the UWES simultaneously in order to understand their dynamic interplay, makes perfectly sense. Then so far most research either included only the three MBI-subscales (e.g., Leiter & Maslach, 2016), or only the exhaustion – vigor and the cynicism – dedication dimensions of burnout and engagement (e.g., Mäkikangas, Feldt, Kinnunen & Tolvanen, 2011). As Leiter and Maslach note, including all subscales simultaneously will uncover the dynamic nature of a wide range of possible psychological connections that employees have with their work. Scientifically speaking, this is a laudable goal. Also because this is commensurate with the dialectical perspective that reconciles the seemingly contradictory “opposite poles” and “independent constructs” positions in the burnout vs. engagement debate. Yet, this comes at a price. And that price is to be paid by practitioners.

3. Burnout and work engagement as societal challenge

Instead of “splitters” like researchers, practitioners such as occupational health psychologists, counselors, psychotherapists, occupational physicians, general practitioners, HR-officers, but also managers and supervisors are “lumpers”. Whilst scholars split concepts into ever-smaller pieces in order to study their details, practitioners tend to lump pieces together in order to understand the grander picture that may guide their actions. That

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means that for practitioners, burnout and work engagement remain viable and relevant overall concepts, no matter the splitting into various subscales by scientists. To illustrate this point, “burnout” is mentioned as such in Article 3 of the *Belgian Royal Decree of April 10th 2014* on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work. Article 3 stipulates that employers are obliged to identify the psychosocial risks at work that might lead to burnout. Hence, in Belgium burnout is a legal term and consequently employers and practitioners have to act upon that, for instance by screening employees who run a high risk on burning-out. In a similar vein “burnout” is an officially sanctioned medical disorder in European countries like Sweden, Finland, and The Netherlands that provides access to disability and health care claims (e.g. Grossi, Perski, Osika & Savic, 2015). This means that in these countries valid and reliable diagnostic tools are necessary to assess burnout.

In a similar but somewhat less dramatic way, work engagement also constitutes a societal challenge. For instance, in 2008 the British Secretary of State for Business commissioned a report that should bring together all empirical and practical evidence for the significance of work engagement for business. The report entitled “*Engaging for success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement*” (<http://engageforsuccess.org/engaging-for-success>) should help the government to improve innovation, performance and productivity of British economy. The idea was that a high collective level of engagement of the British workforce would increase the competitive advantage of British economy. This illustrates that increasing work engagement is not only an issue for individual companies, but also for national governments. Tellingly, since 2015 the European Working Conditions Survey, that is administered every five years in all EU member states plus a number of associated and candidate states, includes an ultra-short 3-items version of the UWES (Schaufeli et al., in press).

In short: burnout and engagement are concepts that are used as such outside academia. And what is more, the practical use of these concepts in legal, health care, and business contexts, has implications for individuals, organizations, and even for the society at large.

4. Burnout and engagement as syndromes

So whether researchers like it or not, “burnout” is used as a unitary concept in practical settings in various countries. In fact this is in accordance with its origin, namely the colloquial use by American human services professionals in the 1970s to refer to a syndrome of mental exhaustion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a syndrome as “a group of signs and symptoms that occur together and characterize a particular abnormality or condition”. The original notion of burnout as a mental syndrome is compatible with a multidimensional perspective on burnout, provided that these dimensions occur together (i.e. are highly correlated) and refer to the same underlying condition (i.e. mental exhaustion). Seen from this perspective, the practical use in many European countries of the burnout concept is in line with its original connotation as a syndrome.

Unfortunately, the MBI is not a proper tool to assess the burnout syndrome because it does not allow discriminating between burned-out and non-burned out individuals. The main reason is its lack of internal coherence. One of its symptom dimensions (lack of professional efficacy) is only weakly to moderately correlated with the other two dimensions, and seems to work differently (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005). In addition, levels of reduced professional efficacy do not differ significantly between those who are diagnosed as burned-out – based on a clinical interview – and those who are not (Roelofs, et al., 2005). In the same study reduced professional efficacy also did not correlate with burnout diagnosis. These findings agree with the experience of professionals that lack of professional efficacy is not a symptom of the burnout syndrome but rather a consequence. Hence, there is a need for an alternative, internally coherent tool to assess the burnout syndrome, at least in those countries where burnout is used in a legal or health care context.

In contrast, the UWES can be considered an appropriate measure for assessing the “syndrome” of work engagement because it produces a single score. The three dimensions of the UWES (vigor, dedication, and absorption) are highly interrelated with Pearson correlations exceeding .80, and all dimensions refer to the same positive affective-motivational condition of fulfillment. However, the UWES – and any other measure of work engagement, for that matter – has an immanent problem; cut-off scores for distinguishing levels of engagement are arbitrary. Since no external criterion for engagement exists, one has to rely on statistical norms that are, for instance, based on the 25th and 75th percentiles of a normative sample. Practically that means that individuals “low” in engagement belong to the bottom quartile of the normative sample, whereas those “high” in engagement belong to the upper quartile. The establishment of cut-off scores that are based on meaningful normative samples – such a national representative sample of a nation’s working population – is therefore paramount.

In short: in order to meet the societal challenges that are related with burnout and work engagement, it seems a good idea to conceptualize both as “syndromes”; that is, a group of strongly related symptoms that occur simultaneously and all refer to a specific underlying condition.

5. Future research agenda

In our view the future research agenda for burnout and work engagement is twofold. First, in order to meet the scientific challenge, researchers should include all subscales of the MBI and UWES simultaneously and investigate their dynamic interplay across shorter and longer time periods, using diary studies and person-centered approaches, respectively. That way and based on the dialectical perspective, a detailed picture emerges of various ways employees connect psychologically with their work. As Leiter and Maslach point out in their contribution this will tell us how people experience their work, how they feel about it, and how this unfolds across time. This will lead to a further differentiation (splitting) of different types or profiles and improve our knowledge in the field of occupational health psychology.

Second, in order to meet the societal challenge, burnout and work engagement should be studied as “syndromes” using measures that allow to discriminate between burnout and non-burnout cases and to classify employees as low, average, or high in work engagement. This will provide a wide range of professionals, but also companies, policy makers, and NGO’s with proper tools and information that can be used to prevent and assess burnout and to increase work engagement, both at the individual as well as collective levels.

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