



Research Article

Burnout, work engagement and workaholism among highly educated employees: Profiles, antecedents and outcomes



Hely Innanen^{a,*}, Asko Tolvanen^b, Katariina Salmela-Aro^a

^a University of Jyväskylä, Department of Psychology, Finland

^b University of Jyväskylä, Methodology Centre for Human Sciences, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the longitudinal profiles of burnout, engagement and workaholism among highly educated employees. First, the latent profile modeling indicated two latent classes: Engaged and Exhausted-Workaholic. Second, the results revealed that employees with the Engaged profile experienced high levels of energy and dedication, whereas employees with the Exhausted-Workaholic profile experienced exhaustion, cynicism and workaholism. Social pessimism in the transition from high education to work predicted poor subjective well-being at work. Further, workaholism decreased during the career among members of the Exhausted-Workaholic profile suggesting positive direction during career. Finally, Engaged employees experienced detachment and relaxation, life satisfaction and rewards.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this longitudinal study was to identify different profiles of subjective well-being at work (i.e. burnout, work engagement and workaholism) among highly educated employees. We targeted this group of employees as their work fulfills the criteria proposed by the theory of work engagement and burnout: high education may increase work engagement when faced with emotionally challenging work (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, & Fischbach, 2013), and it may protect against risk of burnout (Ahola et al., 2004). As our theoretical framework, we applied the circumplex model of subjective well-being (SWB) at work (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011) (see Fig. 1).

The majority of the existing research on burnout and work engagement has taken a variable-oriented approach (for example (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, Leiter, & Schaufeli, 2009; Kahn, 1990)). The results of such studies have indicated, for example, that burnout (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008), and work engagement (Seppälä et al., 2009) are stable over time. However, a stability coefficient does not demonstrate dynamic developmental processes of work-related well-being over time, and it also fails to take into account inter-individual differences. A person-oriented approach,

in turn, assumes population heterogeneity with respect to the phenomenon of interest (here SWB at work) and changes in it (see (Laursen & Hoff, 2006a)). Such an approach may lend additional support to the theory of SWB at work by taking account diversity in SWB on the individual level by identifying different groups of employees who follow a similar pattern of development of SWB over time. A few previous studies have applied a person-oriented approach in the area of work and organizational psychology (Boersma & Lindblom, 2009; Mäkikangas, Feldt, Kinnunen, & Tolvanen, 2012; Feldt et al., 2013; Mäkikangas, Feldt, & Kinnunen, 2007). The present study contributes to the literature by adopting a person-oriented approach (Bergman & Trost, 2006; Laursen & Hoff, 2006b) in order to gain a deeper understanding of SWB at work on the individual level. Specifically, our aim was to identify the proportion of highly educated employees experiencing low activation and displeasure, and thus at the highest risk for severe burnout. Conversely, we expected to find employees who are engaged, highly activated and experiencing pleasure (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011). By adding the impact of workaholism into the SWB profiles, we hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the role of all the factors relating to the different profiles of SWB at work, and so contribute to filling an important gap in the research literature.

The nature of the present study is explorative. Thus, we are cautious about precisely formulating potential longitudinal profiles or means, or possible mean changes in the SWB profiles (including the variables of simultaneous burnout, work engagement and workaholism) (Feldt et al., 2013). At the very least, we

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 40805 3491; fax: +358 14260 2801.

E-mail addresses: hely.innanen@jyu.fi (H. Innanen), asko.tolvanen@psyka.jyu.fi (A. Tolvanen), katariina.salmela-aro@psyka.jyu.fi (K. Salmela-Aro).

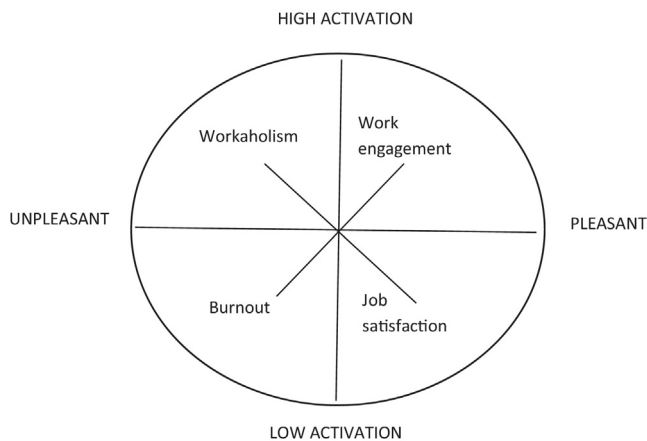


Fig. 1. A two dimensional view of work-related subjective well-being (adopted from Bakker and Oerlemans [Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011]). A simplified model.

expected to find heterogeneity in SWB at work in a sample of highly educated employees with diverse occupational and organizational backgrounds. Furthermore, we expected to find at least one longitudinal high-level work engagement profile (with simultaneous low-level burnout and low workaholism) (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011) and one longitudinal high-level burnout profile (with simultaneous high level workaholism and low level work engagement), as examples of these have previously been found in the Finnish working population (for review see (Ahola et al., 2004; Kauppinen et al., 2012)). In accordance with the model of SWB at work (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011), we expected workaholism to be higher in the profiles characterized by burnout, as employees who mainly experience negative emotions at work tend to suffer simultaneously from burnout and workaholism.

Finally, to deepen our understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of SWB at work, we examined the profiles obtained, first, with respect to achievement and social strategies in the transition from university to work, as antecedents of the emergent profiles. Second, we examined the profiles obtained with respect to recovery strategies, life satisfaction, rewards and sense of community as outcomes of the emergent profiles.

1.1. SWB at work

Traditionally, subjective well-being has referred to how an individual evaluates his or her life and well-being (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991a). In line with the definition of the more recent circumplex model of SWB at work by Bakker and Oerlemans (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011) (see Fig. 1) affective states of SWB at work arise along two continua: the pleasure–displeasure continuum and the high activation–low activation continuum. These affective states can be described as a linear combination of these continua, that is, of pleasure and activation (Russell, 2009). Consequently, the level of simultaneous activation and pleasure defines an employee’s SWB at work.

More specifically, in the circumplex model of SWB at work (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011) (Fig. 1) the quadrant characterized by positive emotions and high activation is likely to result in work engagement, and the quadrant characterized by positive emotions and low activation is likely to result in job satisfaction. Further, the quadrant that is characterized by negative emotions and low activation is likely to result in burnout, and the quadrant characterized by negative emotions and high activation is likely to result in workaholism. In the present study we focused on the three quadrants (burnout, work engagement and workaholism) relevant for the present study. Although we adopted the SWB at work model

(Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011), we were not aiming to test the model itself. Instead, we adopted the model for the purpose of examining the SWB profiles, and thus we did not include the quadrant of job satisfaction in our study. The current view of work engagement and burnout on the basis of both Finnish and international studies is that positive and negative states of SWB at work represent different phenomena which employees can nevertheless experience simultaneously (Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005; Folkman, 2008; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002).

1.1.1. Work engagement as a positive form of SWB at work

Work engagement, defined as a positive work-related state of mind (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), has been previously characterized either as the polar of burnout in the same continuum (Maslach et al., 2009) or as a conceptual opposite, i.e. an independent positive construct, negatively related to burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2002). To gain the best understanding of SWB at work, we examined work engagement as an independent three-dimensional positive construct (including energy, dedication, absorption), operationalized according to the definition by Schaufeli and his colleagues (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Energy refers to high levels of mental energy, dedication describes the cognitive dimension of work engagement, including a sense of meaningfulness and challenge, and absorption refers to being fully focused (Schaufeli et al., 2002) and deeply preoccupied in one’s work to the extent that it is difficult to stop working. Engaged employees are enthusiastic and energetic, involved and reasonably committed to their work. They put all their physical, emotional and mental energies into their work, and therefore are capable of optimal performance and feel positive emotions at work (Kahn, 1990; Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008). As a consequence, they work long hours, but feel pleasure (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992) and are not addicted to work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

1.1.2. Burnout and workaholism as a negative form of SWB at work

Negative indicators of SWB at work include burnout and workaholism (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011) (Fig. 1). The three-dimensional model of burnout comprises high levels of exhaustion and cynicism and a low level of professional efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Exhaustion refers to the stress dimension of burnout and to a lack of mental energy; cynicism, the cognitive dimension of burnout, refers to negative attitudes toward one’s work and co-workers; and professional efficacy refers to one’s beliefs in one’s efficacy at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Recently, increased research interest has been shown in workaholism, the other negative form of work-related well-being in the circumplex model of SWB (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012a). Workaholism is generally described as a tendency to work excessively hard (Oates, 1968; McMillan, O’Driscoll, Marsh, & Brady, 2001), and is marked by being obsessed with work and unwillingness to disengage from work (i.e. psychological dependence on work) (McMillan & O’Driscoll, 2004; Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009). Workaholics have an extremely powerful desire to achieve (Mudrack, 2006; Mudrack & Naughton, 2001), and hence are unable to resist a compulsive need to work (Taris, Schaufeli, & Shimazu, 2010). In pursuit of achievement, workaholics expend a lot of energy on work without sufficient recovery (Sonnetag & Zijlstra, 2006; Porter, 2001). The most obvious characteristic of workaholics is an addiction to work, meaning that they tend to work harder than is required and reject other life contexts (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2008). Berglass (Berglass, 2013) found workaholics’ lack of the capacity or willingness to engage in intimacy with others (i.e. a propensity to social pessimism). Thus, focusing on work may serve as an excuse to avoid participating in social functions at work. As a consequence they have poor relationship quality (Bakker, Demerouti, & Burke, 2009), and poor life satisfaction (Taris, Schaufeli, & Verhoeven, 2005).

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