



Competitive climate and workaholism: Negative sides of future orientation and calling



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ABSTRACT

The perception of a competitive climate at work creates stress, uncertainty, and a desire to outperform colleagues. In this study, we investigated whether a competitive climate is associated with increased workaholism. Furthermore, we assumed that especially employees with a future orientation and a presence of a calling will show more workaholic behavior when a competitive climate is present. Hierarchical regression analyses among 812 employees in Germany confirmed our hypotheses: Competitive climate was positively related with workaholism and was stronger related to workaholism under conditions of high future orientation and high calling. These findings suggest that contextual factors at work and individual factors interact to form workaholism. Our results may be explained by the experience of more uncertainty in competitive work climates for individuals with high future orientation and the presence of a calling. Consequently, these employees may invest more physical and cognitive efforts into their work to cope with the competition.

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1. Introduction

The changing labor market (e.g., global competition) has forced many employees to put more effort into their work (van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris, & Schreurs, 2012). This type of heavy investment can be associated with workaholism, which is a tendency to work excessively hard and to be obsessed with work, which manifests itself in working compulsively (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2008). A recent meta-analysis showed that workaholism has positive (e.g., better career prospects) and negative (e.g., higher counterproductive work behavior) relations with work outcomes. However, the relationships with family and individual non-work outcomes are clearly negative, and workaholism appears to be harmful for physical and mental health. The meta-analysis also showed that dispositions and aspects of the work environment can act as reinforcements to workaholism (Clark, Michel, Zhdanova, Pui, & Baltes, 2014). From a theoretical understanding, organizational values and climate, and particularly peer competition, could support the development of workaholism as well (Liang & Chu, 2009; Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007). With this study, we extend knowledge on antecedents of workaholism by investigating the contextual variable of competitive climate as a source of workaholism. This provides more knowledge regarding the still understudied role of organizational

factors for the inducement of workaholism. Additionally, we investigate the possibility that employees with a future orientation and a calling are more prone to become workaholics when confronted with competitive climates, thereby providing a more fine-grained understanding of the conditions under which competitive climates and workaholism are related.

1.1. Workaholism: Definition and antecedents

Workaholism has been described as a need to work compulsively and excessively. *Working compulsively* refers to an individual's inner drive to work and feeling compelled to work. When not working, feelings of guilt and discomfort occur (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2008; Spence & Robbins, 1992). *Working excessively* can be described as working extremely hard over and above the degree that is expected by the employer or set by the employment contract. There are no specific assumptions regarding the motivation to do so (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2008).

Conceptually, models regarding the inducement of workaholism (e.g. Liang & Chu, 2009; Ng et al., 2007) include personal factors (e.g., personality, self-esteem, and work values), sociocultural and work–family factors (e.g., learning experiences in childhood, conflicts at home, and the economic situation), and work or organizational factors (e.g., competition at work, career systems, and stressors). Taken together, the models assume that workaholism is related to multiple personal and contextual variables that facilitate or reduce workaholism.

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Most of the empirical research on precursors of workaholism analyzed dispositional variables (e.g., Big Five and negative affectivity) or work-related variables (e.g., job demands and work involvement) as antecedents of workaholism. However, within this set of analyzed correlates, contextual-organizational factors such as competitive climate have not been investigated – although they may play an important role for the inducement of workaholism.

1.2. Competitive psychological climate and workaholism

Competitive psychological climate is defined “as the degree to which employees perceive organizational rewards to be contingent on comparisons of their performance” with their coworkers (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998, p. 89). Competition usually is either considered as having positive or negative effects. Some researchers see competition as positive because individuals inherently want to compete with each other (cf. social comparison theory; Festinger, 1954), and competition can increase motivation and focuses attention on the task which results in higher performance (Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008). However, a study that tested the assumption of better performance at an individual level found that performance was not affected by competitive climates (Brown et al., 1998). Others see competition as possibly harmful and unhealthy because competition leads to negative behaviors such as undermining others or exploitation of oneself (Kohn, 1992). In competitive climates, employees may perform at high levels but still not succeed in terms of organizational rewards (i.e., salary and managerial status) (Clark et al., 2014). This perception of possible losses while investing much time and effort can lead to feelings of uncertainty and stress (Fletcher et al., 2008). As a result, employees who perceive a competitive climate may invest greater efforts to be superior to colleagues and start feeling discomfort and guilt when not working (Schaufeli, Taris, & Bakker, 2008). In accordance with these arguments, competitive climates have the potential to foster behaviors that are linked with workaholism.

Hypothesis 1. *Competitive climate is positively associated with workaholism.*

1.3. Future orientation as moderator between competitive climate and workaholism

The first moderator that we investigated in our study was future orientation, also called future focus. Future orientation is an individual characteristic that describes the ability to envision future events and states (Szpunar, Watson, & McDermott, 2007) or one's preference for allocation of attention to the future (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009). Future oriented cognition has been associated with long-term planning and career adaptability, which are beneficial for employees (e.g., career planning) and organizations (e.g., strategic planning) (Das, 1987; Zacher, 2014). Among other factors, future orientation has been shown to be an important driver of longer strategic planning horizons and achievements (Fried & Slowik, 2004). The positive relations with achievements may be based on the proneness of future oriented individuals to anticipate what is next; this enables these individuals to proactively shape their employment circumstances and careers (Zacher, 2014).

Future oriented cognition can be activated through environmental conditions such as organizational climate (Strobel, Tumasjan, Sporrle, & Welpe, 2013). As described above, competitive climates can create uncertainty and anticipation of wins or losses (Fletcher et al., 2008). Gains and losses are valued differently in anticipation than in retrospect. Positive and negative emotional reactions towards future events tend to be more extreme than towards past events (Caruso, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2008). Therefore, the anticipation of a possible future loss, a scenario that is induced through a competitive climate, may be experienced

more frequently and as more threatening to individuals with a future orientation. One strategy to deal with this discomfort is through behavior that could make winning more likely, for example, working longer and harder. To cope with the uncertainty associated with a competitive climate, future oriented employees may also engage more often in strategic planning in an attempt to find new methods to outshine others and to advance themselves over their team members, resulting in constantly thinking of work.

Hypothesis 2. *The relationship between competitive climate and workaholism is stronger for individuals with a high future orientation.*

1.4. Presence of calling as a moderator between competitive climate and workaholism

As a second moderator, we investigated the presence of a calling. Research has shown that having a calling is commonly associated with positive work and well-being outcomes such as increased work engagement, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction (Duffy & Dik, 2013). However, recent research also noted the possibility that the positive effects of a calling may depend on being able to live out the calling (Duffy, Bott, Allan, Torrey, & Dik, 2012). Moreover, having a calling may have negative effects, such as dissatisfaction or distress, when the calling remains unanswered (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010). People with a calling should be strongly motivated to be able to actually live their calling because only lived callings promise positive effects such as job and life satisfaction (Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2012), whereas unanswered callings can be a source of distress (Berg et al., 2010). People who are already able to live out their calling to a considerable degree should therefore be motivated to maintain the jobs, positions, and tasks that allow them to continue living their calling. Similarly, individuals who are not or barely able to live their calling should be motivated to obtain the jobs, positions, and tasks that allow them to live their calling. For both types of people with a calling, a competitive climate is likely perceived as a threat to their ability to be able to (continue) living their calling because a competitive climate implies that desired jobs, positions, and tasks are more difficult to obtain or maintain and, thus, again creates uncertainty. Hence, similar to future-oriented people, employees with a calling may start to feel the need to constantly work and work longer and harder to be able to obtain or maintain the jobs, positions, and tasks that allow them to be able to live their calling. Therefore, we assume that people with a calling may show increased tendencies to work compulsively and excessively if they are working in a competitive climate.

Hypothesis 3. *The relationship between competitive climate and workaholism is stronger for individuals with a high presence of calling.*

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Data collection occurred at the end of 2014, and participants were recruited via a German online panel service. The sampling goal was to recruit employed adults in the age groups of 5 to 34 and 50 to 59 years that were representative for German employees in private business in terms of gender and education. A random selection ($N = 3307$) of members of the online panel were invited to participate in the survey, and 1805 (54.58%) clicked on the invitation link and expressed consent to participate. Of those respondents, 965 met the criteria regarding gender and education, worked at least 20 h per week, and were employed in private industry (not self-employed or in education). 880 respondents completed more than 50% of the questionnaires and provided no inconsistent or atypical responses that could have indicated minimal interest and insufficient seriousness.

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