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Burnout and engagement: Identical twins or just close relatives?

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ABSTRACT

Past research has frequently cast doubts on the theoretical and empirical distinction between the concepts of work engagement and burnout. Drawing on cross-sectional survey data from 1535 Dutch police officers, the current study examined (a) the associations among the two core dimensions of burnout (i.e. exhaustion and cynicism) and work engagement (vigor and dedication); and (b) the concurrent and discriminant validity of these dimensions by relating these four dimensions to various important job demands and job resources. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the distinction between burnout and engagement is elusive. Moreover, although the indicators of burnout and those of engagement differed in terms of their job-related correlates, these patterns of associations only partly supported previous theorizing on the antecedents of burnout and engagement. We conclude that burnout and engagement are to a large degree overlapping concepts and that their conceptual and empirical differences should not be overestimated.

1. Introduction

Although the relationship between burnout and engagement has received considerable attention during the past 15 years, at present it is still unclear whether these concepts are empirically and conceptually different or whether they constitute two faces of the same coin (Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O'Boyle, 2012; Leon, Halbesleben, & Paustian-Underdahl, 2015). To some degree this is not surprising, since engagement and burnout focus on the same underlying phenomena: energy, involvement and efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that burnout and engagement are the opposite poles of a single continuum that can be covered fully with one instrument (the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). However, as Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002) noted, the *absence* of burnout does not necessarily imply the *presence* of engagement or vice versa, leading these authors to develop an instrument (the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, UWES) that specifically tapped engagement. After publication of this measure research on work engagement has grown exponentially (e.g., see Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008, for an overview), but the question whether engagement and burnout are really different concepts is still open. The present study addresses this question, drawing on a large dataset of 1535 Dutch police officers. Using confirmatory factor analyses we test a number of theory-grounded models to examine (1) the association(s) among the indicators of burnout and engagement, and (2) their job-related correlates, drawing on the two main processes described in the

Job demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

1.1. Burnout versus engagement

1.1.1. Burnout

Maslach (1993) defined burnout as “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among professionals who work with other people in some capacity” (p. 20). Emotional exhaustion referred to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources; depersonalization involves having an indifferent and negative attitude towards others, especially the recipients of one's services; and (reduced) personal accomplishment refers to a decline of one's feeling of competence and achievement in one's work. In line with this conceptualization, Maslach and Jackson (1986) devised the three-factor Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) that measured burnout among human services professions. However, there is no particular reason why the occurrence of burnout as a general phenomenon should be restricted to the human services sector (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Therefore, Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, and Jackson (1997); developed a general version of the MBI – the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey, MBI-GS – that was suitable for measuring burnout across a wide range of occupations, including non-contactual professions. In their version the three components of burnout were conceptualized in slightly broader terms, referring to the job rather than to personal

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relationships that could be part of that job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The structure of the MBI has been examined in a number of factor-analytic studies (among others, Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000; Taris, Scheurs, & Schaufeli, 1999). These studies showed that the three dimensions of the MBI could be distinguished empirically and that the association between exhaustion and depersonalization (or cynicism, as this dimension was labeled in the MBI-GS) was especially strong, leading Schaufeli et al. (2002) to conclude that these two concepts constituted the “core” of burnout.

1.1.2. Engagement

In the slipstream of the positive psychology movement that evolved around the turn of the century (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), Maslach, Schaufeli and colleagues supplemented the concept of burnout (which represents a negative psychological state) with its positive antithesis: work engagement (Maslach et al., 2001). Their work on this concept took two paths. On the one hand, Maslach and Leiter (1997) argued that burnout can be seen as an erosion of engagement, with energy turning into exhaustion, involvement turning into cynicism, and efficacy turning into ineffectiveness. Thus, engagement is characterized by energy, involvement and efficacy, the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions. By implication, engagement can be measured by the MBI; phenomenologically, burnout and engagement are conceptual twins in that they are the opposite poles of a continuum that is fully covered by the MBI (Maslach et al., 2001).

On the other hand, Schaufeli et al. (2002) argued that engagement could not be measured in terms of the MBI, since the absence of burnout does not automatically imply the presence of engagement. To tap engagement, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) was developed. Schaufeli et al. defined engagement as a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment that is characterized by three dimensions: vigor (i.e., high levels of energy, resilience and persistence), dedication (i.e., involvement, feelings of significance, pride and inspiration) and absorption (a pleasant state of immersion in one's work). To a large degree this conceptualization covers the same underlying dimensions as burnout: exhaustion and vigor both refer to the energetic component of worker well-being, while cynicism/depersonalization and dedication both refer to commitment. There is no analogue for absorption in the MBI, and it remains unclear whether this dimension really taps engagement (Taris, Schaufeli, & Shimazu, 2009). In practice, many studies focusing on engagement include only the vigor and dedication dimensions, arguing that these constitute the core of engagement.

1.1.3. Engagement versus burnout: factor-analytic evidence

Several researchers have examined the structure of the UWES, frequently in conjunction with that of the MBI to examine the degree to which both concepts could be distinguished empirically. For example, Schaufeli et al. (2002) found in a two-sample study among Spanish undergraduate students and employees working for public and private companies that a two-factor model with exhaustion and cynicism loading on one factor and vigor, dedication, absorption and professional efficacy loading on the other fitted the data best; a result that was later confirmed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) in a study among employees from four different Dutch service organizations and Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, (2008) in a sample of Dutch telecom managers. In a factor-analytic study among two university student samples, a Spanish convenience sample and a sample of employees working with information and communication technologies, Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) also found that efficacy loaded on engagement. In this study, the two central burnout dimensions (exhaustion and cynicism) were complemented with a novel *inefficacy* scale, suggesting that the professional efficacy-dimension of the MBI can be considered an indicator of engagement.

In an interesting three-sample study using item-response theory

among Dutch call center employees, administrative staff of a pension fund and employees of an insurance company, Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, and Lloret (2006) found that the associations among the items of the four dimensions of engagement and burnout (vigor, dedication, exhaustion and cynicism) were accounted for by two bipolar dimensions, namely “energy” (accounting for the items of vigor and exhaustion) and “identification” (accounting for the items of dedication and cynicism), respectively. Similar findings (using confirmatory factor analysis) were reported by Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker (2010) for a sample of South African construction workers. Thus, this research suggests that when focusing on their core dimensions, burnout and engagement cover the same two underlying dimensions, as suggested earlier by Maslach et al. (2001).

1.1.4. Correlates with other concepts

Apparently, factor-analytic studies show that the distinction between burnout and engagement is perhaps not as clear-cut as would be desirable. Another way to examine whether burnout and engagement tap different concepts is to focus on their associations with other variables. One model that is relevant to this issue is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2014; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This model distinguishes between two basic categories of job characteristics: job demands and job resources. *Job demands* are defined as “those physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al., 2001; p. 501). *Job resources* refer to “those physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that [are] functional in achieving work goals; [that] reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; [and/or] stimulate personal growth and development” (p. 501).

Although the distinction between these two categories has been criticized for being overly parsimonious (e.g., no distinction was made between “challenge” and “hindrance” demands, Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Taris, Leisink, & Schaufeli, in press), the model has become the gold standard in examining the associations between work characteristics and worker well-being in general (and burnout and engagement in particular). The core of the JD-R model consists of two largely independent processes. The *energetic or health impairment process* holds that the relation between job demands and outcomes (especially health) is mediated by strain (e.g. burnout). The *motivational process* links job resources to positive outcomes (especially performance), proposing that this relation is mediated through work engagement. Note that there are several versions of the JD-R model around, differing in sometimes subtle ways. Most importantly, different versions of the JD-R vary in two main respects:

- (1) the outcomes considered and their interrelations. The first formulation of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) distinguished between exhaustion and disengagement. The latter is a dimension of burnout that “closely resembles” (p. 500) the cynicism dimension of the MBI-GS, and was assumed to be an outcome of the presence or absence of job resources. However, in later versions of the JD-R model both burnout dimensions were considered as outcomes of the energetic/health impairment process, i.e. as outcomes of job demands, with work engagement taking the place of disengagement (e.g., Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Further, exhaustion has been considered an antecedent of disengagement (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004), but in other instances the usually substantial association between strain and motivation was not interpreted causally anymore (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Further, later versions of the JD-R model tended to focus on relatively broad categories of outcomes, with burnout being only one form of job strain and work engagement representing an instance of the broader class of motivational behaviors (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2007);

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