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## Burnout and work engagement: Do individual differences make a difference?

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### Abstract

The central aim of the present study among 572 Dutch employees was to examine whether burnout and its positive antipode—work engagement—could be differentiated on the basis of personality and temperament. We expected burnout to be characterized by high neuroticism and low extraversion, and engagement by low neuroticism and high extraversion. Additionally, we predicted that burnout would correlate negatively with the temperament traits (strength of excitation, strength of inhibition, and mobility), whereas work engagement would correlate positively. Discriminant analyses were used to distinguish burned-out and engaged employees from their non-burned-out and non-engaged counterparts, respectively. Results showed that high neuroticism is the core characteristic of burnout, whereas work engagement is characterized by low neuroticism in combination with high extraversion and high levels of mobility. Thus, personality and temperament make a difference as far as burnout and work engagement are concerned.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on burnout has nearly exclusively focused on the role of work characteristics (Halbelen & Buckley, 2004; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). This is not surprising because burnout is defined as a *work-related* state of mind (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). However, it remains an intriguing question why some employees report high levels of burnout whereas others working in the same environment do not. The same applies to work engagement, the positive antipode of burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004): Why do some employees thrive in particular jobs, whereas others do not? The current study takes an individual difference perspective and attempts to discriminate employees with high and low burnout scores, and those with high and low engagement scores based on their personality and temperament.

### 1.1. Burnout and work engagement

Burnout is characterized by *exhaustion* (draining of mental energy), *cynicism* (a negative attitude towards work) and *reduced professional efficacy* (the belief that one is no longer effective in fulfilling one's job responsibilities) (Maslach et al., 2001). Green, Walkey, and Taylor (1991) refer to exhaustion and cynicism as the 'core components of burnout', which is illustrated by the relatively low correlations of professional efficacy with both other components (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Furthermore, professional efficacy shows a different pattern of correlations with other work-related variables (Lee & Ashforth, 1996), and seems to develop in parallel to exhaustion and cynicism (e.g., Leiter, 1992).

In contrast to burnout, work engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind, characterized by *vigor* (high levels of energy while working, willingness to invest effort in work, and persistence in the face of difficulties), *dedication* (sense of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge), and *absorption* (being happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties detaching) (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002b). Vigor and dedication are considered as the 'core dimensions' of work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), whereas absorption resembles 'flow', a state of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and seems to act as a consequence of work engagement.

Burnout and work engagement are independent states that are negatively, but not perfectly, related (Demerouti, Bakker, De Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002b). More particularly, vigor and dedication are the direct positive opposites of exhaustion and cynicism, respectively (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, in press). Schaufeli and Bakker (2001) proposed a particular positioning in the existing two-dimensional model that consists of an *activation* and a *pleasure* dimension. They presume that the *activation* dimension is spanned by exhaustion and vigor, whereas the *pleasure* dimension is likewise spanned by cynicism and dedication.

In the present study, we examine whether burnout and work engagement can be characterized in terms of personality and temperament, using the activation and pleasure dimensions as an underlying framework. This seems plausible since these two dimensions seem to overlap with the dimensions that are used to conceptualize affect (e.g., Russell & Carroll, 1999) and personality (e.g., Clark & Watson, 1999; Eysenck, 1990).

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