



Editorial

Work Engagement in Contrast to Burnout: Real or Redundant?



‘Work engagement’ or ‘employee engagement’ – both terms can be used interchangeably – first appeared in the business context and then entered academia in the wake of the positive psychology movement after the turn of the century. It seems that *l’histoire se répète*, since exactly the same happened with burnout about three decades ago in the late 1970s; ‘burnout’ was used first in the human services and was then taken up by researchers interested in job stress. But there is more that connects engagement and burnout: in essence both terms refer to energy, be it energy depletion (burnout) or energy excess (engagement). So it shouldn’t come as a surprise that an ongoing debate is raging about the relationship between burnout and work engagement. It might seem intuitively clear that employees who score low on burnout are not necessarily engaged at work, and that, reversely, those who lack engagement are not unavoidably burned-out. Yet, it has been argued that work engagement is a redundant concept that doesn’t add anything beyond burnout (e.g., Cole, Walter, Bedeian & O’Boyle, 2012).

Some scholars define work engagement as the opposite, positive pole of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), whereas for others both concepts are correlated but independent from each other (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá & Bakker, 2002). Fig. 1 displays both positions graphically.

The nature of the debate is decisively influenced by the way both concepts are operationalized. Most studies on burnout use the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981), whereas most studies on work engagement use the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002). This means that, in fact, the discussion about the relationship between the *concepts* of burnout and work engagement is narrowed to the discussion about the relationship between the *instruments* that tap burnout and work engagement (i.e., the MBI and the UWES). This is clearly a limitation. The advantage, however, is that a large body of empirical research exists that uses identical measures for burnout and engagement across various jobs, occupations, and countries. This opens the possibility of meta-analyses, as is attested by the contributions of Goering, Shimazu, Zhou, Wada, and Sakai and Maricutoiu, Sulea, and Iancu in this special issue.

Whatever its definition, the discussion revolves around the question: is work engagement a ‘real’ entity with specific antecedents, consequences and correlates, and a specific way in which it unfolds over time, or is it a redundant concept that can merely be reduced to lack of burnout? Although the number of publications on work engagement has increased to almost 7,000 – which, by the way, is still relatively modest compared to the 80,000 publications on burnout – this question has not been answered satisfactory so far. So do we really need the concept of work engagement in occupational health psychology and human resources management or can we do without it? In other words, what is the added value of work engagement over and beyond burnout? Or in terms of the title of this special issue; do burnout and work engagement constitute a dual unity or not? The aim of this special issue is to answer these questions.

Basically there are four ways in which the added value of work engagement can be demonstrated and this special issue contains contributions that refer to each of these. First, *psychometric analyses* such as factor-analysis may reveal to what extent the self-report instruments that tap burnout and engagement overlap. So far, the results from this type of studies are inconclusive. Some studies claim that work engagement as assessed with the UWES completely overlaps with burnout, as assessed with the MBI (Cole, Walter, Bedeian & O’Boyle, 2012), whereas others claim that both are negatively related but represent different concepts (Byrne, Peters & Weston, 2016). Please note that such psychometric studies can only be carried out under the condition of independence (see Fig. 1). When burnout and engagement are considered as the opposite poles of the same dimension that can be assessed by the same instrument, whereby low scores represent engagement and high scores burnout (or vice versa), independence cannot be studied. Part of the contribution of Taris, Ybema and van Beek in this special issue is devoted to investigating the distinction of burnout (MBI) and work engagement (UWES) by using confirmative factor analysis.

Second, *theoretical analyses* may show that engagement and burnout differ at a deeper psychological level. In her contribution to this special issue Sonnentag defines work engagement at the task level and burnout at the job level. She maintains that engagement emerges during the process of working and may fluctuate from task to task, and thus within the course of a working day. In contrast, burnout is conceived as a chronic state that developed over longer periods of time, is less versatile and more pervasive, and is related to the job and not to particular tasks. Hence, the dynamics of work engagement and burnout differ fundamentally, she argues.

Third, *conceptual analyses* might reveal that the nomological network in which burnout and engagement are embedded differs. That is, burnout and engagement may be related to different antecedents and consequences. Using a large-scale cross-sectional survey among police officers, Taris and his colleagues analyzed the differential associations of job demands and job resources with burnout and work engagement. In another contribution to this special issue Goering et al. used a meta-analytic structural equation model to estimate effect sizes of job demands, job resources and outcomes on burnout and work engagement.

Finally, *longitudinal analyses* may uncover differences in the way burnout and work engagement develop across time. This special issue includes two papers on this issue. First, Maricutoiu et al. use meta-analytic data to analyze the cross-lagged longitudinal effects of burnout and work engagement. That is, they try to answer the question: Does work engagement lead to burnout, or the other way around? In the second paper, using a person-centered approach, Mäkikangas, Hyvönen and Feldt seek to identify subgroups that differ in the way that burnout and engagement develop

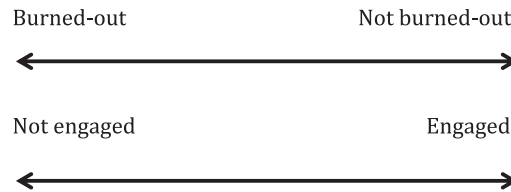
Opposite poles*Independent constructs*

Fig. 1. Relationships between burnout and work engagement.

across a period of eight years. In addition, they investigate the differences between the identified subgroups in their experiences of progress in their personal work goals.

Taken together, the five papers that are included in this special issue, which represent all four perspectives mentioned above, shed a unique light on the question whether burnout and work engagement constitute a dual unity; or phrased differently, whether work engagement is ‘real’ or ‘redundant’. In their summarizing discussion paper Leiter and Maslach propose a new vision on how to integrate burnout and engagement research. Finally, Schaufeli and De Witte use in their outlook an overarching dialectical approach to integrate the findings of this special issue and discuss their scientific and practical implications.

References

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