



Burnout and engagement: contributions to a new vision

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Editorial

Burnout and engagement: Contributions to a new vision



1. Introduction

This special issue has produced an especially interesting set of articles, all of which have the goal of gaining some new insights into the relationship between burnout and engagement. Burnout is considered to be a negative experience at work, and work engagement a positive experience, but are they connected in some way? Are they the opposite sides of the same coin, the opposite endpoints of shared dimensions? Or are they more independent constructs, which have more unique and non-shared characteristics and correlates? Or, as Schaufeli and De Witte have framed the question for this special issue, is work engagement “real or redundant?”

For the past fifteen years, these questions have been cast in the form of a debate between dueling definitions of engagement. This debate emerged largely from two research measures that both posited a construct that was named “engagement” but that was defined differently.¹ The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI, Maslach & Jackson, 1981), defined burnout in terms of high negative scores on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (later re-labelled as exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy in the MBI-General Scale; Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996). The MBI was later amended to propose that the opposite pattern of high positive scores on these same dimensions would represent a phenomenon called engagement (Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 1999). This positive pattern included high efficacy and accomplishment at work, but with few or no signs of either exhaustion or cynicism. Subsequently, a different measure of engagement was developed by Schaufeli and his colleagues, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES, Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). This measure defined engagement as a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment that is also characterized by three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Although the first two dimensions appear to be possible “opposites” of the first two burnout dimensions, the third one is not, and the authors have argued that work engagement is more independent of burnout, rather than its direct opposite.

Over many years, the basic approach of past studies has been to compare these two measures in order to address this basic “opposite vs. independent” issue. Most of the articles in this special issue take a similar approach, but they focus on new ways to compare the MBI and the UWES, by utilizing new sets of data analytic strategies. Although the beginning of this debate began with the idea of developing a positive contrast to burnout, it seems to have become primarily an extensive number-crunching of two scales.

2. MBI vs. UWES

Despite the single terms of “burnout” and “engagement,” both the MBI and the UWES were developed as three-factor constructs, rather than as a single factor. A broad level distinction between the MBI and the UWES is that the UWES captures a construct with a high level of internal consistency. All items in all three subscales have positive wordings. The three subscales correlate highly with one another. They remain factorially distinct with the full 15-item scale, but the factor structure tends towards two or even one factor with the short 9-item version.

In contrast, the MBI captures a construct that has less internal coherence. Although the negatively-worded exhaustion and cynicism scales have a level of consistency as reflected in their correlations similar to that of the correlations among the UWES subscales, the positively-worded professional efficacy scale has weaker and negative correlations with the other two subscales. In some samples, the correlation of exhaustion and cynicism does not reach statistical significance. The developers of the MBI argued that this quality more accurately captured the complexity of the experience of career crisis experienced by employees, as gleaned from prior interviews with them. However, critics of the MBI claimed that the relative lack of a stronger correlation with the professional efficacy subscale, meant that it was really not a viable part of the burnout concept, and thus many researchers deleted it from their studies (Schaufeli & Salanova 2007). In contrast, the third UWES subscale of “absorption” has not received the same level of criticism of being a “non-viable” part of the engagement concept, but it is also not always included in research studies, as they primarily focus on the question of opposition (exhaustion v vigor, cynicism v dedication (e.g., González-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006)) rather than the overall conceptual space addressed by the measures.

One difference between the UWES and the MBI is that there appears to be a general consensus to score the short version of the UWES as a single factor measure, whereas no such consensus exists for determining a single burnout score for the MBI. In the current special issue, any research using a unitary burnout score based it on exhaustion and cynicism alone, explicitly excluding studies that based the composite score on all three MBI

¹ There are also other measures of “engagement” in the business world, which use different definitions as well, but the current focus is on just these two research measures.

subscales. What is also noteworthy about the data analyses in this special issue is that none of them deal with all six subscales of the MBI and UWES as distinct units, which leaves some important questions unanswered.

In particular, the debate on burnout vs. engagement has had an odd view of the professional efficacy subscale of the MBI, given that it correlates more highly with the UWES subscales than with the MBI subscales. In some sense, the MBI seems to have already contained a viable measure of “engagement” (even though it was not developed in those terms or recognized as such until many years later). However, this statistical fact has not been embraced by engagement researchers, but has been viewed as “most problematic,” and has led to the rejection of the subscale from much of the research on burnout and engagement. But given that the MBI had already existed for twenty years and was well known to the developers of the UWES, one could argue that the burden should have rested on them to establish that the new measure identified a new construct that could be conceptually distinguished from the prior measure, in order to avoid possible concept redundancy.

In the current special issue, several authors limited their data analyses to contrasting the first two subscales of the MBI and the UWES: exhaustion with vigor (the energy dimension), and cynicism with dedication (the identification dimension). The analyses confirmed that these two pairs of constructs worked in opposition and suggest that considering burnout and engagement as opposites would capture much, although not all, of the dynamics between these constructs.

However, although negatively related, engagement and burnout show some different patterns of changes over time, as well as of correlates with other constructs, such as demands and resources. Perhaps the best way to characterize all of these results is to say that work engagement appears to be *both* “real and redundant.” It is negatively related to burnout (and thus is somewhat redundant), but it also has some unique other relationships (and thus is real). It is neither completely opposite, nor completely independent. As such, it appears to be a “middle ground” kind of construct – related, but different – and this may be why the “middle ground” term of “distinct” is generally in wider use to characterize work engagement.

3. New conceptual directions

But there are other meanings of “middle ground” that might contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between engagement and burnout. The Sonnentag article (which is unique in its theoretical analysis and research proposals) raises one set of possibilities, namely that engagement is an experience that fluctuates and is not chronic. Thus, a person could move between different levels of engagement, for different tasks, within different periods of time, rather than always being fully engaged. The fluctuation and task-focused arguments could fit in to a revised engagement construct with a wider distribution among people and over time. In fact, the larger point might be that work engagement is more the norm, for most people most of the time, and that burnout is the negative deviation from that norm that can become more chronic (and may be harder to change). High burnout is a small extreme – is high engagement also a small extreme, or does it refer to a larger portion of the distribution? For example, when people are experiencing the middle ground of “average,” or “OK,” or “just fine” – how is that related to engagement?

This new approach brings the concept of time into the discussion. The UWES and the MBI use the identical frequency scale that asks respondents to estimate retrospectively the frequency with which they experienced specific indicators of exhaustion, vigor, etc. Given human frailty, it is likely that respondents’ frequency ratings reflect their general feelings more than a precise count of experiences over the previous year. As noted, a person can feel exhausted and vigorous on the same day, or with any other combination of the six subscales. In fact, a mix of positive and negative psychological states at work seems consistent with psychological states that are responsive to events on the job, as well as to variations in one’s health or general life experiences. Recognizing that one experience sits on the opposite pole from another experience does not mean that they are mutually exclusive.

A conceptual oddity arising from the names of the MBI and UWES measures is that they were developed with an eye on the state captured by extreme scores in one direction, with less consideration for what scores in the middle or the opposite extreme signified. Recently, we considered a wider range of psychological connections with work captured by distinct patterns of MBI scores (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). The combination of positive and negative items, and the relatively low correlation of efficacy with the other two subscales produced a varied set of five profiles: Burnout, Disengaged, Overextended, Ineffective, and Engagement. Given that burnout is one of five profiles and the smallest of the five, the measure is more accurately an inventory of psychological connections with work, rather than a purely burnout measure. The profiles are not just “burnout profiles” but profiles of varying combinations of exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy. We are not contending that the MBI works as the ideal measure, but rather that the task of identifying the range of states people experience at work could be structured to capture a more diverse range of profiles rather than producing a single dimension from good to bad or bad to good.

The developmental changes over time reported in the Mäkikangas paper are an excellent example of future research on a broader range of work experiences. By tracking profiles over time, the analysis goes beyond the static patterns to consider trajectories. The results showed varying degrees of stability and instability for exhaustion/vigor and changes in opposing directions for cynicism/dedication. There was little or no evidence of both parts of a pair moving in the same direction, consistent with an antagonistic tension between them.

Taris, Ybema, and van Beek used extensive factor analysis to consider a range of possibilities, although without an absolutely definitive conclusion. One of the challenges in exploring the relationships among the MBI and UWES subscales is that the question is often phrased as a definitive contrast of opposite vs. independent. Although analyses do not establish opposition, the high correlations among the subscales provide clear evidence that they are not independent. Correlations of that size would generally be taken as signs of interdependence among variables of interest. The appropriate question is not whether these obviously inter-related (conceptually and statistically) constructs are independent, but what is the nature of their relationships.

In their analyses focusing on hindrance and challenge demands, Goering, Shimazu, Zhou, Wada, and Sakai noted the complexity of relationships of demands with exhaustion, vigor, cynicism and dedication. They conclude that the constructs occupy distinct conceptual space, but that they share some core characteristics in how people respond to demand situations.

Maricutoiu, Sulea, and Iancu demonstrated through their meta-analysis that exhaustion, vigor, cynicism, and dedication were not only highly inter-correlated but maintained stability over time. Their analysis did identify a sweet spot of a time lag (5–12 months), in which lagged relationships among the subscales were more evident. This timing was consistent with recommendations based on analyses of diverse variables (Dormann & Griffin, 2015).

4. Conclusion

If a simple relationship exists among the subscales of the MBI and the UWES, it remains elusive. The encouraging message from the complex and

indeterminate findings across all these analyses is that these qualities reflect the complex and indeterminate nature of how people feel about their work. One conclusion from this exploration may be that further progress in this arena may not come from assessing the presence or absence of a specific state, but from considering a range of possible psychological connections with work that encompass all of the core dimensions of vigor, exhaustion, dedication, cynicism, efficacy, and absorption.

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