A dialectical perspective on burnout and engagement

Matthew R. Leon [a,1], Jonathon R.B. Halbesleben [a,*], Samantha C. Paustian-Underdahl [b]

[a] University of Alabama, Box 870225, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States
[b] Florida International University, 11200 S.W. 8th Street, MANGO 475, Miami, FL 33199, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

With strong empirical evidence existing for conflicting models, the nature of burnout and engagement continues to be debated. Scholars have recognized the need to theoretically clarify the nature of the burnout–engagement relationship in order to advance empirical research related to both topics. The purpose of this paper is to reconcile existing perspectives through an alternative approach that provides an alternate view of burnout and engagement based on dialectical theory. Implications for common theories used to study burnout and engagement are discussed, followed by suggestions and models for future research utilizing dialectics.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier GmbH. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Despite much attention over the past decade, the nature of the relationship between burnout and engagement continues to be debated (Cole, Walter, Bedeian, & O'Boyle, 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Burnout includes three primary symptoms: emotional exhaustion (feeling emotionally overwhelmed by one's work), depersonalization (also known as cynicism or disengagement, defined as detachment or indifference from others at work), and reduced personal accomplishment (also referred to as professional efficacy, which is the tendency to evaluate one's efforts and achievements negatively; Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Engagement is a work-related state denoted by positive emotional attachment to work and is composed of vigor (described as high levels of mental fortitude and energy during work), dedication (a sense of significance and enthusiasm for work), and absorption (maintaining full concentration and being deeply engrossed in work (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002)).

The link between burnout and engagement is complex; both constructs have been shown to independently influence employee behavior and interactions, including OCBs, absenteeism, and performance (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Harter, Schmidt,

& Hayes, 2002; Hoxsey, 2010). However, scholars remain undecided on a unified perspective of the properties of burnout and engagement in relation to the other. Two conceptually conflicting models (explained in detail in a later section of this manuscript) have received empirical support as potential explanations of the burnout/engagement interaction. Yet, burnout and engagement scholars continue to issue calls to resolve conceptual discrepancies between the models and clarify the relationship between burnout and engagement (Cole et al., 2012; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). A collective view of the burnout–engagement relationship is central to providing a clear understanding of the antecedents affecting engagement and burnout, as well as behavioral outcomes associated with this relationship to advance theoretical and practical knowledge of this phenomenon.

The purpose of this paper is to reconcile existing perspectives through an alternative approach that provides an alternate view of burnout and engagement based on dialectical theory. Dialectical theory is founded on the idea that paired opposites (also referred to as contradictions) are essential to change and growth within and between individuals (Baxter, 1990). Dialectics not only provide a plausible way of thinking about the relationship between burnout and engagement, but better capture the empirical findings regarding the relationship between the two constructs. In addition, dialectics provides a theoretical basis to observe and explain dynamic fluctuations between burnout and engagement states within an individual, creating a conceptual platform for describing the interplay and effects of burnout and engagement on each other, and addressing critiques associated with the engagement construct. Borrowing from literature on relational dialectics, that explore changes within individuals, we propose that burnout and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 205 348 2702.
  E-mail addresses: mrleon@crimson.ua.edu (M.R. Leon), jhalbesleben@cba.ua.edu (J.R.B. Halbesleben), spaustia@fiu.edu (S.C. Paustian-Underdahl).
  [1] Tel.: +1 251 554 9790.

engagement represent a dialectic (i.e., a relationship between two opposing but interdependent constructs) that is driven by a sub-dialectic characterized by demands and resources.

2. A brief history of burnout and engagement

Historically, burnout began as a "people-oriented" job phenomenon and was considered exclusively in the realm of service occupations such as health care, education, and other jobs with high face-to-face contact (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Over time, the context of burnout was expanded to include any job field under which a person could experience the three sub-dimensions of burnout regardless of contact with others (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Antecedents of burnout that were not necessarily associated with human contact such as increased information processing demands, lack of organizational identity, and lack of fairness in the workplace fueled burnout's expansion beyond people-oriented occupations (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). As such, the Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI-GS) was developed to provide a more generic measure of burnout (measuring general levels of exhaustion, cynicism, and personal efficacy) and acted as a catalyst toward the empirical study of burnout across various industries and settings (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). From the 1980s until the early 2000s, the negative effects of burnout were studied extensively and provided the foundation from which the modern engagement construct emerged.

Engagement was first explicated by Kahn (1990) in his qualitative piece examining conditions at work under which an employee personally engages or disengages him or herself from the job at hand. Kahn defined personal engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances" (p. 700). On the other hand, Kahn stated that disengagement constituted withdrawal and defense of the employee's preferred self through engagement in behaviors that opposed and dissuaded physical, cognitive, and emotional connection to the job while simultaneously encouraging incomplete role performance. His ideas on personal and work engagement were used as the foundation for theoretical investigation into the construct over the coming years.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) provided a definition of engagement as energy, involvement, and efficacy as the direct opposite of the three burnout dimensions. Several years later, Kahn's (1990) initial conceptualization of personal engagement gave rise to Rothbard's (2001) two-dimensional (attention and absorption) description of engagement within the roles of work and family (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). Around the same time, Schaufeli et al. (2002) put forth engagement as the three-dimensional construct composed of vigor, dedication, and absorption that led to the development of the most widely used engagement measure today, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This definition has become the most commonly used throughout the engagement literature and is employed in current engagement models. Therefore, throughout the rest of this manuscript, we refer to Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) conceptualization when discussing engagement.

Engagement has been examined through many of the same theories used to study burnout such as Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1988), as well as the Job Demands Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and intuitively provides an "anti-burnout" construct from which to gauge employees' investment in various aspects of their jobs. However, as researchers examined engagement in closer detail, issues arose in defining the construct alongside its partner, burnout. Perhaps most important

among these issues was conceptualizing how burnout and engagement existed in relation to one another. While a general consensus was reached that burnout and engagement were relative opposites, researchers became interested in the dynamic interaction of the two constructs and the effects they had on each other.

As both bodies of literature continued to grow, Maslach and Leiter (1997) and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) offered different conceptualizations of the burnout–engagement relationship. Each of these models presents an insightful look into the engagement construct and provides scholars with several angles from which to explore its relationship with burnout. With evidence supporting each, these models have been offered to explain the internal fluctuations of an individual experiencing burnout or engagement states and how each relates to the other. The coexistence of several burnout–engagement models has led to a splintering of ideas on the best way to test this relationship and has caused scholars to push for a clearer positioning of burnout and work engagement (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

As such, moving forward in the exploration of this relationship may require a new paradigm from which to extend future research (Cole et al., 2012; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). To promote clarification and a more holistic understanding of the burnout–engagement relationship, the best path forward may be an integration and reconciliation of already discovered similarities and differences to more fully comprehend how engagement relates to burnout and vice versa. However, with scholars expressing the fear of pouring old wine into new bottles by revisiting past alternatives or otherwise conflagrated phenomena, we propose the introduction of dialectical theory as a framework from which to observe the dynamics of the burnout–engagement relationship.

3. Current models of the burnout–engagement relationship

As noted, several attempts have been made to define the theoretical relationship between the burnout and engagement constructs and to identify adequate methods for its measurement. Conceptualizations of burnout and engagement as a joint pair have considered the two as mutually exclusive opposites on a continuum that could be derived from a single measure, independent states that needed to be measured separately, and as the same construct that could be measured using only a burnout scale (Cole et al., 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Despite these views providing contradictory explanations, each perspective has gained high levels of support and provides a unique contribution toward an understanding of the burnout–engagement relationship.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) led the effort to define modern work engagement in light of burnout. Under their model, burnout and engagement occupied opposite ends of a continuum where the engagement dimensions acted as the positive antitheses of the burnout dimensions associated with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; with energy, involvement, and absorption corresponding to exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy, respectively). Burnout was defined as "an erosion of engagement with the job" where engagement dimensions slowly decay into their opposing and corresponding burnout dimensions (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 416). As such, the MBI could be used to measure both constructs where low scores on exhaustion and cynicism paired with high scores on efficacy indicated engagement. Maslach and Leiter (1997) provided empirical support for their view using case studies of two hospital units, showing that a group scoring highly in the MBI engagement indicators exhibited favorable scores in a test of job-person fit while the inverse was true of a high burnout group. Using this logic, an individual is either burned out or engaged and moves from one state to the other.