



Engagement, boredom, and burnout among students: Basic need satisfaction matters more than personality traits[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the Five Factor Personality Model and Self-Determination Theory, the current study examines the relations between three different kinds of well-being – engagement, boredom, and burnout- and personality, and evaluates whether basic need satisfaction has an incremental contribution over personality in explaining these types of well-being. In a sample of 255 students we found that agreeableness and neuroticism were significantly related to each well-being dimension, whereas conscientiousness was only significantly related to engagement and to boredom, and extraversion being only significantly related to burnout. Need satisfaction significantly contributed to well-being, over and above personality. Results indicate that certain personality factors play a role in well-being, but that the fulfillment of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is of additional importance.

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1. Introduction

Drawing on the Five-Factor Model of personality traits (FFM; McCrae & Costa, 2003) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), the present study examines whether personality traits and satisfaction of basic psychological needs are associated with three types of study-related well-being – engagement, boredom, and burnout-, and whether satisfaction of these needs explains students' well-being above and beyond stable personality traits. Although engagement, boredom, and burnout are explained to a certain degree by personality traits (e.g., Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009) and need satisfaction (e.g., Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008a), there is virtually no research that considers personality traits and need satisfaction simultaneously in explaining these forms of well-being. A notable exception is a study by Andreassen, Hetland, and Pallesen (2010) that showed the incremental validity of need satisfaction over personality traits as far as workaholism is concerned.

Engagement, boredom, and burnout are usually examined among employees, but recently, research on students is starting to focus on these forms of well-being as well (e.g., Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, &

Bresó, 2010). Like employees, students are involved in structured and compulsory activities (e.g., taking part in classes and doing projects) which are focused on specific goals (i.e., passing exams and graduating). Hence, students' activities can be seen as “work”. Building on previous research on engagement and burnout among students (e.g., Hu & Schaufeli, 2009; Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002), this study aims to provide insight into personality traits and motivational factors that may foster or thwart well-being. Specifically, it contributes to the literature in at least two ways. First, we provide a detailed analysis of personality traits correlates for the well-being components. Second, we analyze the incremental contribution of need satisfaction over personality measures. Such analyses will contribute to an explanatory model of well-being that focuses on traits, which are relatively stable (McCrae & Costa, 2003), and on psychological needs, that represent motivational dimensions that are influenced by the social environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

2. Well-being

Engagement, boredom, and burnout are three different forms of well-being. Engagement refers to a positive, affective state of mind that is characterized by high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and immersion in activities so that time flies by (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Engagement is fostered by resources (e.g., high autonomy) and challenging demands (e.g., high levels of responsibility; Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010), and has positive consequences for students

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(high grades, Salanova et al., 2010; low drop out, Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009).

Boredom refers to an unpleasant, affective state of mind characterized by a pervasive lack of interest in activities and experiencing difficulties with concentrating (Fisher, 1993). Research on boredom has focused on task characteristics (e.g., repetitive work, low stimulation, or variation; Fisher, 1998). Boredom at school was found to be associated with missing lectures and maladaptive student behaviors (Mann & Robinson, 2009). Furthermore, low challenge is related to boredom in the case of gifted students (Preckel, Götz, & Frenzel, 2010).

Lastly, burnout can be defined as a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's activities and uncertain about one's capacity to perform (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Lack of resources (e.g., insufficient teacher support) and high academic demands (e.g., study overload) are significantly associated with students' burnout (Salanova et al., 2010). Like boredom, burnout is associated with detrimental consequences for students (decreased academic performance, Schaufeli et al., 2002).

In brief, engagement, boredom, and burnout are associated with different antecedents and underlying processes. They are conceptually and psychometrically distinct from each other (Reijseger, Schaufeli, Peeters, Taris, Van Beek, & Ouwenel, 2013). Below, we explain how personality traits and basic need satisfaction relate to well-being.

3. Personality

The FFM is currently the dominant paradigm in personality research (McCrae, 2009) and reflects five broad domains: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Neuroticism refers to an individual's tendency to experience distress and negative affect (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Individuals with low levels of neuroticism are likely to perceive themselves positively, to pursue self-concordant goals (i.e., values and interests; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005), be more engaged (Inceoglu & Warr, 2012; Mostert & Rothman, 2006), less bored (Hill & Perkins, 1985) and less burned-out (Alarcon et al., 2009; Hochwälder, 2006). Neuroticism mirrors high stress sensitivity (Suls, 2001). Therefore individuals high in neuroticism might experience their environment as threatening and, in turn, experience negative emotions and burnout (Langelaan, Bakker, Van Doornen, & Schaufeli, 2006).

Extraversion reflects the extent to which individuals are active, enthusiastic, and have the tendency to experience positive emotions (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Extraversion is positively associated with engagement (e.g., Langelaan et al., 2006), because both concepts entail activeness and energy. Moreover, positive emotions build personal resources and lead to engagement (broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 1998). Because extraverted persons tend to be energized and fun-loving (McCrae & Costa, 2003), they may be less prone to experience states of deactivation and displeasure, such as burnout and boredom (Bakker, Van der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006).

Conscientiousness is defined by features like responsibility and perseverance (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Conscientious persons tend to have high aspirations and focus on goals that they have set (McCrae & Costa, 2003). This also holds for engaged individuals, who are inclined to pursue goals that represent their wishes and aspirations (Van Beek, Taris, Schaufeli, & Brenninkmeijer, 2014). Therefore, it is no surprise that conscientiousness was positively related to work engagement (Inceoglu & Warr, 2012; Sulea, Virga, Maricutoiu, Dumitru, & Sava, 2012). Due to their characteristics, individuals high in conscientiousness feel more prepared to face demands and are less vulnerable to boredom and burnout (Alarcon et al., 2009; Hochwälder, 2006).

Agreeableness refers to the extent to which an individual is collaborative and sympathetic towards others (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Research on the relation between agreeableness and engagement is scarce and did not reveal significant associations (Kim, Shin, & Swanger, 2009). Still, agreeableness may foster supportive relationships

with peers, that may stimulate personal growth and help to cope with demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), therefore, promoting well-being via developing interpersonal resources. Agreeableness was found to be negatively associated with burnout (Alarcon et al., 2009).

Lastly, openness to experience reflects the extent to which an individual is creative and intellectually curious (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Students with such characteristics may engage in active coping and craft their studies to their values and preferences (e.g., making their tasks more challenging) which, in turn, might foster well-being (e.g., Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012). Openness to experience is negatively related to depersonalization (Bakker et al., 2006) and positively related to personal accomplishment (Storm & Rothman, 2003), two dimensions of burnout.

Therefore, we expect that:

Hypothesis 1: Engagement will be positively associated with conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and openness to experience, and negatively associated with neuroticism.

Hypothesis 2: Boredom will be positively associated with neuroticism and negatively associated with conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and openness to experience.

Hypothesis 3: Burnout will be positively associated with neuroticism and negatively associated with conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and openness to experience.

4. Need satisfaction

In addition to personality traits, satisfaction of innate psychological needs is considered to be essential to students' development and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) individuals are active and growth-oriented by nature. They are inclined to fulfill their potential, meaning that they are oriented towards exploring the world, gathering knowledge, and actively pursuing challenges and interests (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, & De Witte, 2008b). For this to happen, it is necessary that three innate psychological needs are fulfilled: the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within the study context, the *need for autonomy* represents a student's desire to regulate himself and his behavior, and to experience psychological freedom and choice when studying. The *need for competence* refers to a student's desire to interact effectively with the environment by experiencing mastery and engaging in challenges. The *need for relatedness* represents a student's need to feel connected with fellow students and to experience amicable relationships.

Individuals with fulfilled needs are more strongly motivated (i.e., display a higher amount of motivation for an activity; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006) and are also qualitatively better motivated (Van den Broeck et al., 2008a). They engage in activities which they value or find interesting and enjoyable; that is, they are autonomously motivated. Furthermore, fulfilled psychological needs generate a sense of energy (e.g., Lens & Vansteenkiste, 2006): they are accompanied by feeling vigorous (Van den Broeck et al., 2008a) and being engaged in the task (Deci et al., 2010). In contrast, unfulfilled needs inhibit a student's development and are associated with decreased well-being (Van den Broeck et al., 2008a), possibly because unfulfilled needs thwart optimal motivation (Lens & Vansteenkiste, 2006; Van den Broeck et al., 2008a). Individuals with unfulfilled needs engage in activities to avoid punishments (i.e., disapproval by others), to obtain rewards (i.e., appreciation by others), or to buttress themselves with feelings of self-worth. Moreover, unfulfilled needs thwart the generation of a sense of energy (Lens & Vansteenkiste, 2006; Van den Broeck et al., 2008a): they are associated with emotional exhaustion (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007).

Individuals' reactions to their study environment and their well-being may be explained, as argued previously, from a trait as well as a

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