No fit, no fun: The effect of motive incongruence on job burnout and the mediating role of intrinsic motivation

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ABSTRACT

We developed and tested the hypotheses that motive incongruence (i.e., incongruence between a person's implicit and explicit motives) would be associated with higher job burnout and that this relation would be mediated by lower intrinsic motivation. The results of an online study with 49 executives enrolled in an Executive MBA program confirmed the hypotheses. The findings are discussed with respect to the theoretical conceptualization of impaired intrinsic motivation as a consequence of motive incongruence. On the basis of our findings, interventions ought to be directed at helping people gain an improved understanding of their implicit motives rather than trusting their perceptions in identifying job stressors that need to be removed.

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1. Introduction

"Whatever the reasons for discordance between implicit and explicit motives, it can certainly lead to trouble" (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989, p. 700). In the last 25 years, research has indeed shown that incongruence between implicit motives and explicit motives, goals, or values has detrimental effects on well-being (e.g. Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005; Kehr, 2004a), life satisfaction (Hofer, Chasiotis, & Campos, 2006), identity achievement (Hofer, Busch, Chasiotis, & Kiessling, 2006), and volitional strength (Gröpel & Kehr, 2013; Kehr, 2004a). Taken together, empirical studies have widely supported McClelland et al.'s (1989) speculation. We intended to extend this research by examining the relations between motive incongruence (i.e., incongruence between implicit and explicit motives), intrinsic motivation, and job burnout, a variable that has received a great deal of attention in organizational research (e.g. Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). We empirically tested the idea that motive incongruence would be associated with lower intrinsic motivation and also with higher job burnout and that intrinsic motivation would mediate the positive relation between motive incongruence and job burnout.

McClelland et al. (1989) proposed the existence of two distinct motive systems—a conscious (i.e., explicit) system and a nonconscious (i.e., implicit) system—that operate independently of each other (cf. Kehr, 2004b; Rawolle, Schultheiss, & Schultheiss, 2013; Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001; Spangler, 1992). The implicit motive system comprises a limited number of biologically based motivational needs that represent the capacities to experience particular classes of incentives as pleasurable. Implicit motives are typically measured with projective or semiprojective tests, such as the Picture Story Exercise (PSE; Schultheiss, 2008) or the Multi-Motive-Grid (MMG; Sokolowski, Schmalt, Langens, & Puca, 2000). Such tests offer pictorial stimuli meant to arouse the implicit motive system. The explicit motive system, by contrast, houses a person's explicit motivational orientations as reported in self-report measures such as the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984).

Building on the research on motive incongruence summarized above, researchers have speculated that motive incongruence may impair a person's intrinsic motivation (Kehr, 2004b). According to Kehr's (2004b) compensatory model of motivation and volition, intrinsic motivation results when (a) the behavior at hand is congruent with the individual's currently aroused implicit motives, and (b) there are currently no competing activated explicit motives or goals. Hence, intrinsic motivation is not identical to aroused implicit motives. An additional requirement for intrinsic motivation is the absence of conflicting explicit motives (Kehr, 2004b). This line of reasoning led us to expect that motive incongruence, a state in which the behavioral

impulses stemming from a person's aroused implicit motives are discrepant from the action tendencies stemming from his or her activated explicit motives, would be associated with lower levels of intrinsic motivation.

Further, we wanted to extend findings on the consequences of motive incongruence to job burnout (Maslach, 1982). We chose job burnout as the dependent variable because the present research was set in a work-related context where job burnout is a prevalent phenomenon. Job burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from chronic stress caused by a mismatch between a person's needs and the workplace environment (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Thus, it seemed likely that such a mismatch could be caused at least in part by motive incongruence: individuals usually choose their job as well as the objectives and tasks in their job according to their goals and their self-concept. A person's goals and self-concept are related to the explicit motive system (Kehr, 2004b; McClelland et al., 1989). Motivationally incongruent people who are not aware of their implicit motives are hence at risk of choosing and creating a workplace environment that is not aligned with their implicit motives. Consequently, their work activities have to be carried out without the support of or even against their implicit motives and corresponding behavioral impulses. Furthermore, it seems likely that the work of a person suffering from such incongruence will not offer opportunities to satisfy the person's implicit motives (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2001). Chronic distress and job burnout, thereby, seem to be likely consequences of this dilemma.

Despite the high probability of motive incongruence as a cause of job burnout, this relation has yet to be examined. Therefore, we intended to analyze the impact of motive incongruence on job burnout. Furthermore, we wanted to test whether the presumed positive association between motive incongruence and job burnout would be mediated by lower levels of intrinsic motivation. In support of this proposition, a study in an applied setting has shown a negative relation between intrinsic motivation and job burnout (Van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris, & Schreurs, 2012). Also, Rubino, Luksyte, Perry, and Volpone (2009) provided empirical support for the notion that intrinsic motivation functions as a mediator of the relation between work stressors and burnout. In sum, this led us to propose that incongruence between implicit and explicit motives would be associated with higher levels of job burnout and that this relation would be mediated by lower levels of intrinsic motivation.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

We determined the desired sample size on the basis of an estimated medium to large effect size, which we derived from existing research on the association between motive incongruence and well-being or volitional depletion (Kehr, 2004a) as well as between intrinsic motivation and burnout (Van Beek et al., 2012). The power analysis for a multiple regression with two predictors, $f^2 = 0.20$, alpha $= .05$, and power $= .80$, yielded an optimal sample size of 51 participants. We added nine participants to compensate for an estimated dropout rate of about 20% in studies with executives. The 60 participants were enrolled in an Executive MBA program.

Individual feedback was offered in exchange for voluntary participation in this online study as part of a course. Eleven participants were excluded from the analyses either because they did not complete the study due to technical problems with the online survey ($n = 10$) or because of extremely implausible responses ($n = 1$). The final sample consisted of 49 (19 women, 30 men; $M_{age} = 36.14$ years, $SD = 7.53$) participants. Participants worked in low to middle management positions in diverse industries including finance ($n = 10$), retail ($n = 8$), medical/pharmacological ($n = 6$), consulting ($n = 4$), manufacturing ($n = 3$), telecommunication ($n = 3$), law ($n = 3$), energy ($n = 3$), and others ($n = 9$).

2.2. Design and procedure

We used a mediation research design with motive incongruence as the predictor, intrinsic motivation as the mediator, and job burnout as the dependent variable. Participants were given access to a 30-min online survey via a link sent by email. They first completed the Multi-Motive-Grid (MMG; Sokolowski et al., 2000) and then the Personality Research Form (PRF; Jackson, 1984) to assess their implicit and explicit motives, respectively. To make the work context more salient, participants were then asked to envision themselves at work and to describe their business-related strivings in 10 sentences. This was followed by the Motivation at Work Scale (MAWS; Gagné et al., 2010), the Burnout Measure Short Version (BMS; Malach-Pines, 2005), and some demographic questions.

2.3. Measures

Implicit motives were assessed with the MMG (Sokolowski et al., 2000), a semiprojective instrument (Schmalt, 1999; Sokolowski et al., 2000) with a long research tradition (Schmalt, 1976). Like the Picture Story Exercise (PSE; Schultheiss, 2008), the MMG uses pictorial stimulus material to arouse the person's implicit motives. It consists of 14 pictures, each of which is accompanied by a set of three statements, each representing one of the three motive domains: achievement, affiliation, and power. Participants used a bipolar "yes/no" scale for each statement to indicate whether it fit the picture. Examples of statements are "Feeling good about one's competence" (achievement), "Hoping to get in contact with other people" (affiliation), and "Trying to influence other people" (power). The scores for each motive across the set of 14 pictures are summarized to obtain the person's motive scores. Conceptually, motive scores range from 1 to 12. According to a review of several studies by Sokolowski et al. (2000), internal consistency and reliability of the MMG are high. Further, Sokolowski et al. reported differential predictive validity for the MMG subscales. For instance, the MMG power motive predicted leadership success (Sokolowski & Kehr, 1999); the MMG affiliation motive predicted the number of affiliation-related behaviors in daily life relative to other behaviors (Sokolowski et al., 2000); and the MMG achievement motive predicted optimism (Puca & Schmalt, 2001) and task-performance (Puca & Schmalt, 1999).

We used the MMG instead of the Picture Story Exercise (PSE; Schultheiss, 2008) because in earlier studies with management samples (e.g., Kehr, 2004a), we found that the MMG had good acceptance in this population, whereas the use of the PSE resulted in high dropout rates.

Explicit motives were assessed with three subscales from the PRF (Jackson, 1984): dominance/power (e.g., "The ability to be a leader is very important to me"; PRF-Pow), achievement (e.g., "I enjoy difficult work"; PRF-Ach), and affiliation (e.g., "I try to be in the company of friends as much as possible"; PRF-Aff). Each subscale includes 16 True/False (1/0) questions that describe habits that are consistent or inconsistent with each motivational domain.

To estimate motive incongruence, we applied a commonly used method (Kehr, 2004a; Schultheiss, Patalakh, Rawolle, Liening, & MacInnes, 2011) and calculated the absolute differences between the z-standardized MMG and PRF scores separately for each motive domain to obtain an implicit–explicit motive discrepancy score for each motive domain (IED-Pow, IED-Ach, IED-Aff). The resulting three scores for motive-domain-specific incongruence were then averaged to obtain a composite measure of motive incongruence across all three motive domains.

Intrinsic motivation was measured with the subscale-intrinsic motivation of the Motivation at Work Scale-(MAWS; Gagné et al., 2010) consisting of three items ("Because I enjoy this work very much," "Because I have fun doing my job," and "For the moments of pleasure that this job brings me"). Using a 7-point scale, participants rated each item on the extent to which it currently corresponded to one of their reasons for doing their job.