



## Burnout and work engagement: Independent factors or opposite poles?

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### Abstract

Burnout researchers have proposed that the conceptual opposites of emotional exhaustion and cynicism (the core dimensions of burnout) are vigor and dedication (the core dimensions of engagement), respectively (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). We tested this proposition by ascertaining whether two sets of items, exhaustion–vigor and cynicism–dedication, were scalable on two distinct underlying bipolar dimensions (i.e., energy and identification, respectively). The results obtained by means of the non-parametric Mokken scaling method in three different samples ( $N_s = 477, 507,$  and  $381$ ) supported our proposal: the core burnout and engagement dimensions can be seen as opposites of each other along two distinct bipolar dimensions dubbed energy and identification.

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## 1. Introduction

Burnout is a reaction to chronic occupational stress characterized by emotional exhaustion (i.e., the draining of emotional resources), cynicism (i.e., a negative, callous, and cynical attitude towards one's job) and lack of professional efficacy (i.e., the tendency to evaluate one's work negatively). A major part of the research on burnout has focused on identifying its antecedents and outcomes (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). Only in recent years have burnout researchers started to pay attention to the conceptual opposite of burnout: *work engagement* (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Work engagement is a multidimensional construct defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. *Vigor* is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. *Dedication* is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. *Absorption* is characterized by fully concentrating on and being deeply engrossed in one's work, where time passes quickly and one has difficulty detaching oneself from work.

Emotional exhaustion and cynicism are considered the core burnout dimensions (Green, Walkey, & Taylor, 1991). Reduced efficacy was added as a constituting element of burnout after it emerged as a third factor from a factor-analysis of a preliminary version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach, 1993). Conceptually, professional efficacy has been criticized as reflecting a personality characteristic rather than a genuine burnout-component (Coders & Dougerthy, 1993; Shirom, 2003). Empirically speaking, this criticism is supported by the relatively low correlation of professional efficacy with both of the other burnout dimensions (Lee & Ashforth, 1996) and by the fact that cynicism seems to develop in response to exhaustion, whereas professional efficacy seems to develop independently and parallelly (Leiter, 1993).

Analogously, vigor and dedication are considered the core dimensions of engagement, and absorption was found to be a relevant aspect of engagement after some thirty in-depth interviews were carried out (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2001).

Theoretically, vigor is conceived as the opposite of emotional exhaustion, and dedication is conceived as the opposite of cynicism (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli et al., 2002). According to this view, vigor items and emotional exhaustion items measure a single underlying *bipolar* dimension, and, consequently, they should be scalable on a single underlying bipolar dimension. The same applies to the other pair of opposite constructs: dedication items and cynicism items should be scalable on a single underlying *bipolar* dimension as well. These underlying bipolar dimensions have been labeled energy and identification, respectively (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

However, to date, the assumption that exhaustion–vigor and cynicism–dedication constitute two bipolar dimensions representing energy and identification, respectively, has not been *tested*. Instead, the factor structure underlying the relationships among *total scores* on the three burnout dimensions and the three engagement dimensions was assessed (Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró, & Grau, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Using confirmative factor analysis,

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