



A dialectical perspective on burnout and engagement



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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.

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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

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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.

This model encountered resistance from scholars concerned with using a bipolar model to explain the relationship (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) felt that using the MBI to measure both burnout and engagement was questionable, stating that positive and negative affects should be considered two independent states rather than opposite poles of the same dimension. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) elaborated upon Maslach and Leiter's (1997) interpretation of the burnout–engagement relationship by depicting the two constructs as independent states that had to be measured separately from each other (i.e., engagement could not be inferred from measures such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory and burnout could not be measured using engagement measures like the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale; Schaufeli et al., 2002).

The authors stated that they “did *not* feel that engagement [was] adequately measured by the opposite profile of MBI scores since – logically speaking – this implies that both concepts are each other's complements” (Schaufeli et al., 2009, p. 294). Although Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) expected a negative relationship between burnout and engagement similar to Maslach and Leiter's model, Schaufeli and Bakker did not see the two constructs as complementary or mutually exclusive states. In sum, Schaufeli and Bakker considered engagement and burnout independent – albeit highly negatively related – constructs as opposed to a singular, bipolar construct.

Finally, although engagement and burnout are both generally considered three-dimensional constructs, some scholars have expressed doubts regarding the inclusion of lack of professional efficacy as an indicator of burnout (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005). In part, this is due to measurement issues associated with inferring lack of efficacy through positively worded items that are later reversed (Bresó, Salanova, & Schaufeli, 2007; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Doubts surrounding this area are both theoretical and empirical, with additional concern arising from practitioners working with burnout victims. As such, the primary focus of this manuscript will be on the core of burnout (exhaustion and depersonalization) and engagement (vigor and dedication), and will exclude an exhaustive examination of efficacy and absorption (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006).

3.1. Clarifying the constructs

Both of these models have been studied extensively and contributed to scholars' attempts at a unified definition of engagement, understanding of the burnout–engagement relationship, and provided a basis for training and intervention geared toward increasing engagement or decreasing burnout (Gillet, Huart, Colombat, & Fouquereau, 2012; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). With extensive support and salient theoretical and practical outcomes existing for both perspectives, researchers should not ignore the contributions of either to current research. Nonetheless, scholars have recognized the need to continue exploring the nuances of the burnout–engagement relationship and more clearly differentiate between the two states (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Maslach et al., 1996, 2001).

For example, a recent review by Cole et al. (2012) suggested that burnout and engagement may suffer from construct proliferation, potentially highlighting the need to further define the mechanisms at work between these constructs. In their meta-analysis of 50 samples (37 studies), Cole and colleagues concluded that empirical efforts to distinguish burnout and engagement required more precision in both definition and measurement of each, particularly concerning engagement. They conclude by asking scholars to explore and iterate upon previous efforts in order to build new theory and decrease “conceptual confusion” associated with the burnout and engagement literature (p. 1577).

The concerns of Cole and colleagues, particularly regarding construct proliferation and a large amount of ambiguity regarding the operationalization and interaction between burnout and engagement, outline the primary concerns of scholars in the field at this time. Cole et al. (2012) define construct proliferation as occurring when “the observed correlations of new constructs (such as employee engagement) with existing constructs (such as job burnout) are so similar and their patterns of correlations with other variables are so alike to suggest they may be redundant” (p. 1552). The authors discuss the theoretical bases for current definitions and measurements of engagement under the models proposed by both Maslach and Leiter (1997) and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), concluding that engagement, as measured by the UWES, overlaps with burnout to an extent that the UWES is measuring burnout under the label of engagement.

Cole et al. (2012) offered several suggestions for the clarification of the engagement construct and its relationship with burnout. These suggestions included designing studies for reducing common method variance they believed may have been present based on their observations of previous studies, a call for the independent states perspective to be revised, and a more in-depth examination of demands and resources models in the use of burnout–engagement studies. Cole et al. (2012) noted patterns in data from their meta-analysis such as a prevalent use of cross-sectional, single source data that may have indicated some common method variance and inflated their results. They also argued that future research should differentiate more deeply between resources and demands in a way that allows a more nuanced analysis of the two categories (e.g., dividing demands into perceived challenges that may lead to engaged behavior versus perceived stressors that may cause burnout). They concluded their review by re-issuing a call to continue theoretical exploration of the burnout–engagement relationship.

With multiple models garnering support and a push by researchers and practitioners alike to continue investigating this relationship, we offer Dialectic Theory as a framework for reducing the ambiguity that has arisen regarding the interaction between burnout and engagement. We believe that a dialectic perspective allows for the integration and clarification of previous models of burnout and engagement while answering the calls of authors such as Cole et al. (2012), and others to explore new theories and methodologies in the conceptualization, development and quantitative and qualitative measurement of this relationship. In the sections that follow, we provide a general overview of Dialectic Theory including its origins, the placement and definition of constructs within a dialectical framework, and examples of its use in current research. Further, we move into relational dialectics, a subfield of dialectics, to offer an explanation of the interactions between burnout and engagement as driven by resources and demands.

4. Overview of dialectics

Two broad meanings of dialectics have evolved over time and are in use today, focusing on either ontology or epistemology (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). As stated by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), “dialectics-as-ontology refers to a view of reality as the dynamic interplay of opposing forces, whereas dialectics-as-epistemology refers to a method of reasoning by which one searches for understanding through the clash of opposing arguments (pp. 18–19).” In our reasoning, we will use the assumptions of the former and the methods of the latter. As a philosophy, dialectics-as-ontology began with Lao Tzu in China and Heraclitus in Greece and their meditations on opposing realities to define truths; on the other hand, dialectics-as-epistemology endorses the use of discussion and resolution of contradictory arguments to reach truth (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). To clarify the

difference in meanings, dialectics-as-ontology focuses on assumptions about a dynamic reality (such as fluctuating levels of state burnout and state work engagement within or between individuals), while dialectics-as-epistemology is a method based approach to reasoning utilizing opposing arguments to reach truth or consensus on a subject (such as interpreting competing levels of burnout and engagement within an individual to identify a specific state). In short, dialectics is concerned with inherent contradictions in a relationship and the unique outcomes that result from the interactions between the two constructs in the relationship (Benson, 1977; Carlo, Lyytinen, & Boland, 2012). Moving forward, we will discuss some of the main assumptions of Dialectic Theory, beginning with the assumptions regarding constructs in a dialectic relationship.

Constructs in a dialectic relationship are paired, considered both interdependent and opposing, and are mutually negating in a dynamic relationship that fluctuates with time (Baxter, 1990; Bantham, Celuch, & Kasouf, 2003). That is, dialectic relationships are dynamic and each construct is continually acting on the other to change the relationship. For example, the autonomy–connection dialectic in interpersonal relationships is characterized by an individual constantly maintaining an individual identity (autonomy) while simultaneously remaining connected to another person where one state may be more salient at different times based on internal and external stimuli (Baxter, 1990; Rawlins, 1983). In the case of burnout and engagement, levels of engagement and burnout work against each other to create constantly changing states within an individual that are dominated by one or the other (Sonnentag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010). Further, the temporal fluctuations of these interdependent constructs readily conform to the two root concepts underlying dialectical logic – contradiction and process (Baxter, 1990; Bosserman, 1995).

Contradictions are inherent in life and are the basic drivers of change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). When studying human behaviors, contradictions involve relationships that are complementary (i.e., both sides are needed to reach a joint outcome), mutually implicating (opposites imply, but do not act as measures for, one another), and polarizing (differences concurrently pull opposites apart and bring them together; Bosserman, 1995). A contradiction occurs whenever two tendencies or forces are interdependent yet mutually negating (Baxter, 1990). Further, a contradiction maintains the assumptions of dialectics outlined above (i.e., constructs are paired, interdependent and opposing, and are engaged in a dynamic relationship that changes over time). Also, it should be noted that the presence and interaction of paired opposites (i.e., contradictions) is considered essential to change and growth and does not imply any negating impact of one construct on another (e.g., the presence of burnout would not imply the absence of engagement (Baxter, 1990)).

While contradiction drives change, it is important to emphasize that this concept specifically refers to the pairing of two opposing constructs and how they interact. In dialectical theory, contradiction is a technical term referring to “the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” (Baxter, 1990, p. 8). Oppositions are actively incompatible constructs that mutually negate each other (e.g., burnout and engagement). Dialectics views the struggle of contradiction (i.e., the interaction between oppositions) as a dynamic and fluid process in which the interaction at one point in time sets in motion the nature of future interactions.

The tenets of a dialectic contradiction provide a testable, theoretically based resolution to some of the concerns regarding the burnout–engagement relationship. Specifically, considering the two states as complementary allows for the inclusion of both states within a person at all times to generate the (generally self-reported) levels of burnout and engagement that an individual is currently feeling. For example, previous research supports the idea that an individual’s levels of state burnout and state work engagement can

fluctuate within the span of a single work-day (Dalal, Brummel, Wee, & Thomas, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Taris, 2005; Sonnentag et al., 2010; Sonnentag, 2003), implying that these forces remain in a state of constant flux that result in unique outcomes. Extending this idea, the notions of mutual implication and polarization intuitively follow.

As burnout and engagement work against each other to create certain outcomes (e.g. presenteeism), it follows that, in these cases, one cannot exist without the other. While it is most certainly possible to manifest no engagement or burnout, there are situations where they coexist. Dialectics suggests that not only do they coexist, but they act on each other in a way that produces unique outcomes (e.g., presenteeism). Since each factor contributes uniquely to the final outcome, it cannot be said that the presence of one acts as a measure for the other. Finally, the polarizing properties of burnout and engagement are apparent in actions such as presenteeism, where an individual may be mentally exhausted, sick, or otherwise burned out but still engages in his or her work (Admasachew & Dawson, 2011). Additional examples would be purposefully working to exhaustion or neglecting one’s own needs in order to prove oneself, which are characteristic behaviors of highly ambitious individuals (Freudenberger, 1974). When engaging in these types of behaviors, one may begin to tilt toward a more focused stage of burnout or engagement. For example, highly ambitious employees that are very engaged may overwork themselves to burnout, despite recognizing the need to pull back (Freudenberger, 1974). These examples also illustrate the concept of process.

Process emphasizes the developmental changes that occur as outcomes of the tension between the two constructs in a dialectic relationship (Baxter, 1990). That is, process assumes that outcomes are in constant flux as constructs in a dialectic relationship act on each other (e.g., an employee’s behavior will continuously change as burnout and engagement interact with each other). Regarding the variation of burnout and engagement within individuals, research suggests that state burnout and state work engagement fluctuate on a daily basis along with physical levels of fatigue and tiredness (Bakker & Costa, 2014; Barling & Macintyre, 1993; Sonnenschein, Sorbi, van Doornen, Schaufeli, & Maas, 2007; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). Intrinsically, these construct assumptions provide a platform for studying the interactions between coexisting burnout and engagement states within an individual and provide a framework for addressing several of the concerns raised by scholars.

The assumptions of contradiction and process allow researchers to move away from the idea that burnout and engagement must negate each other. Instead, a dialectic perspective considers them as a mutually implicating pair of constructs. A complementary view refocuses attention on the mutual outcome obtained by the interaction between burnout and engagement where an individual constantly experiences fluctuations of each state. Moreover, combining complementary assumptions with ideas of mutual implication and polarization provide a platform by which burnout and engagement can co-exist within an individual while maintaining distinct properties that are independent, yet act upon, their opposites.

The co-existence of simultaneous levels of burnout and engagement within an individual is not a unique idea, despite the emphasis on empirical work primarily examining either one construct or the other. For example, the co-existence of work engagement and exhaustion can be found in the Job Demands–Resources Model, which remains an essential framework for exploring burnout and engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). This model proposes that engagement and exhaustion both impact levels of job performance through one’s individual levels of resources and demands.

In the context of burnout and engagement, the dialectic process is driven by the sub-dialectic of resources and demands. Generally,

resources act as a contradiction to demands and vice versa. In these cases, resources help negate the negative impact of demands while demands constitute a drain on resources (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). However, it is possible for a glut of resources to serve as demands (Halbesleben et al., 2009). For example, excessive social supports from strong family ties may eventually turn the resource of family support into a demand due to the amount of time it takes to maintain these relationships. Identifying and measuring these changes is essential when observing dialectical fluctuations between constructs.

Through the concept of process, scholars can measure movement (i.e., change) in resources and demands in relation to their impact on burnout and engagement. This change is characterized by the qualitative and quantitative movement in both resources and demands that influence how burnout and engagement shift over time (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Viewed in this way, the tension between resources and demands spurs growth and change within an individual and leads to new behaviors stemming from the interaction between these two variables. Current research supports this view, as can be seen from the shift from a static conceptualization of burnout and engagement toward a more dynamic interpretation with an emphasis on progression over time, with studies examining daily and weekly fluctuations in both constructs (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2012; Sonnenschein et al., 2007). These fluctuations suggest that both burnout and engagement are not only present within each individual, but act on each other.

From a dialectical perspective, resources/demands and burnout/engagement reside in an emergent relationship; that is, change in state burnout and state work engagement results from the ongoing interaction of resources and demands under the context of the external environment (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Werner & Baxter, 1994). This emergent view is similar to current views of resources and demands. As previously mentioned, the Job Demands–Resources Model directly incorporates this idea. Dialectical theory extends it by emphasizing that changes in burnout and engagement are cyclical and interdependent, where resources and demands influence levels of both constructs.

5. Dialectics in an organizational context

Dialectics has been utilized in organizational studies for over thirty-five years, with scholars employing dialectic viewpoints in observations concerning organizational conflict, change, and function (Benson, 1973, 1977; Chae & Bloodgood, 2006; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). At an individual level, dialectics has been applied to areas such as organizational control processes and employee resistance, employee emotional reactions to organizational tension, and paradoxes of employee participation and workplace democracy (Mumby, 2005; Tracy, 2004a; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Further, organizational communication researchers heavily employ dialectical theories and methodologies in employee behaviors such as organizational participation, workplace democracy, and role development (McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006; Mumby, 2005; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). In these areas and others, the concept of dialectics provides researchers with a framework for better understanding the ways in which two variables can coproduce unique outcomes and emphasizes the moment to moment interactions that produce distinct states within and between individuals (Mumby, 2005).

Kahn (1990) appears to provide the first example of the potential of dialectics in the engagement literature. Although not stated explicitly, Kahn (1990) first mentioned the beginnings of a dialectical framework in his initial conceptualization of engagement and disengagement at work. He proposed that a dialectical tension

existed between (1) the employee that drove personal energy into the work role and (2) the work role that allowed the employee to express him or herself (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Kahn, 1990). Ultimately, the self (i.e., the employee's expression of personal energies) and the work role (i.e., the conditions of the job) acted upon each other to create a dialectical tension that led to engagement or disengagement from the employee's job and organization. Kahn concluded that by finding a work role that allows for optimum investment of personal energy, individuals would be more likely to remain engaged by minimizing strain associated with role conflict.

Previous organizational research utilizing Dialectic Theory and methodology lays the groundwork for extending dialectics into the burnout and engagement literature. The dialectic perspective addresses several relevant critiques of current burnout and engagement research. Specifically, dialectical theory provides an empirically testable conceptualization of the interactions between these two constructs, answers questions regarding the measurement and presence of engagement and burnout in light of the other, and clarifies previous views of the burnout–engagement relationship through an intuitive, valid explanation of the actions and reactions of these two interdependent, yet opposing, constructs. Additionally, dialectics can be used to further elaborate on the role of resources and demands that act on burnout and engagement.

It should be noted that, when discussing burnout and engagement as interdependent constructs, it is not implied that engagement necessarily leads to a depleting process or would trigger a state of burnout. Rather, it is meant to imply that one's state of burnout or engagement is dependent not only on the level of the respected variable, but on the levels of both burnout and engagement within a person (e.g., one's level of burnout is not solely dependent on reported levels of burnout sub-dimensions, but also on reported levels of engagement dimensions). This alludes to the totality tenet of dialectics (discussed in greater detail below) – that a phenomenon can only be fully understood in relation to other phenomena. In this case, we are suggesting that, by measuring both burnout and engagement, we can identify and observe more nuances in both constructs and the behaviors resulting from their presences within an individual.

Recent research has begun to measure both burnout and engagement when observing employee behaviors. For example, Innanen, Tolvanen, and Salmela-Aro (2014) profiled highly educated employees and found that many employees fell under an “exhausted workaholic” profile. These employees, despite experiencing high levels of exhaustion and cynicism, remained highly active in their work and did not disengage from it. Additionally, a recent review by Bakker, Demerouti, and Sanz-Vergel (2014) note that studies examining state-like conceptualizations of burnout and engagement allow us to examine daily and momentary fluctuations within individuals. This may be particularly useful when observing the impact of burnout and engagement on loss and gain spirals, where a reciprocal relationship between burnout/engagement and resources. For example, Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2007) found a reciprocal relationship between personal resources, efficacy, and engagement such that engagement increases efficacy beliefs which then increase personal resources. This accumulation effect may be more pronounced depending on existing levels of individual burnout.

6. Dialectic perspective of burnout and engagement

In empirical studies, the two ends of a dialectic relationship are negatively related, similar to what is typically reported in the burnout and engagement literature. However, the dialectic perspective accommodates two patterns that contradict that negative relationship. First, conceptually, the absence of burnout does not

imply the presence of engagement, and vice versa (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Considering burnout and engagement as opposite ends of a continuum (or a single construct) does not adequately address that “neutral zone” where one is neither burned out nor engaged. Second, burnout and engagement can work to influence the same behavior in seemingly contradictory ways. For example, findings have shown that both burnout and engagement play prominent roles in presenteeism (Admasachew & Dawson, 2011; Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009). However, research has not attempted to reconcile how the two constructs may act together to produce this behavior. Under the dialectic model, an employee could be engaged with work despite experiencing high levels of burnout, leading to behaviors such as presenteeism (Attridge, Bennett, Frame, & Quick, 2009). Likewise, a person may have low levels of both burnout and engagement due to a non-challenging position. The apparent contradiction of experiencing both burnout and engagement has been found in the literature for over 30 years (Karasek, 1979). Specifically, Karasek observed that a contradiction must exist based on studies referencing similar levels of stress across jobs despite different levels of job satisfaction. He notes that “A major paradox of the study was that workers in higher status occupations were more satisfied than others with their jobs, were more mentally healthy, but at the same time experienced greater emotional tension concerning the events occurring on their jobs” (p. 286).

Karasek stated that, despite similarly high levels of mental strain caused by various job demands, research suggests that workers experience different levels of job satisfaction (among other outcomes) based on individual variation and perceived job meaning (in this case, “self-developing challenge”). This directly touches on the idea that job demands and resources (established antecedents of burnout and engagement) can produce job satisfaction despite strain. Further, more recent research has found that relationship between demands and engagement is highly dependent on the individual’s perception of the demand (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). Specifically, when demands were perceived as hindrances, they were negatively associated with engagement; conversely, demands perceived as challenges were positively associated with engagement.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that considering burnout and engagement complete opposites (or a single construct) is inadequate. Moreover, considering them independent constructs is an incomplete view. The dialectic model embraces the nonlinear fluctuations implicit in the burnout–engagement interaction and provides a framework for examining the dynamic nature of this relationship (e.g., how external forces such as resources and demands act on an individual to affect burnout and engagement) by conceptualizing burnout and engagement as interdependent, rather than independent, constructs. Further, this model suggests it is impossible to infer levels of either burnout or engagement from the other since both forces act together to influence behavior.

A subfield of dialectics known as Relational Dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) provides a more detailed framework for exploring burnout and engagement through the resources/demands dialectic. Under the tenets of Relational Dialectics, the internal (i.e., within person) dialectic of burnout and engagement is driven by the external (i.e., the relationship between the person and environment) dialectic of resources and demands.

6.1. Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational Dialectics Theory, stemming from the work of Baxter and Montgomery (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), states that meaning is found between the struggle of two competing discourses, or propositions surrounding a given object of meaning (Baxter, 2011). In a more general sense, relational dialectics espouses the cyclical

nature of progress and regress in relationships within and between persons (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In addition to the process and contradiction assumptions underlying all dialectics, relational dialectics are subject to several additional assumptions: change, praxis, and totality (Rawlins, 1988). Together with contradiction and process, these assumptions emphasize the cyclical nature of the observed relationship and reflect the dynamic properties inherent in it.

Similar to the definition above, contradiction is the struggle of the opposing tendencies in a dialectic relationship. This struggle acts as a driver for fluctuations in the relationship, whether it is within one individual or between multiple individuals. Presently, this would include the interaction between resources and demands as drivers of burnout and engagement within an individual. Levels of burnout and engagement remain in constant flux (i.e., dialectic tension) as the two opposing forces act on each other. Meanwhile, process notes that change is continual and that an individual is constantly fluctuating between opposing states. In this case, an individual’s levels of burnout and engagement would act on each other to produce changes in the dominant state and feeling of the individual.

Change occurs as an outcome of the interaction between contradictions (e.g., demands and resources acting on each other to produce a burned out state). In relational dialectics, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that individuals experience change in repeating spirals (i.e., moving from pole to pole and emphasizing each in turn) or linearly (i.e., moving to a different state of the relationship with no return to any past states). Within individuals experiencing changing levels of burnout and engagement, it is far more likely that they will engage in repeating spirals of change as opposed to linear change. That is, individuals will return to a more burned out or engaged state as conditions change over time.

Praxis, the fourth assumption of the dialectical perspective, states that in acting, people set the stage for their future actions. It is related to contradiction and change in that an individual’s chosen actions in how to deal with contradictions affect their subsequent actions (Dindia, 2010). Under the assumptions of praxis, actions such as investing resources to decrease burnout or increase engagement would be influenced by past choices and would in turn constrain future choices. As can be seen in the history of the burnout and engagement literature, particularly in the utilization of theories such as Hobfoll’s (1989) Conservation of Resources Theory and Karasek’s (1979) Job-Demand Control Model, praxis has been a vital component in conceptualizing, defining, and measuring engagement in light of burnout. For example, research documents loss spirals, or the idea that loss begets loss, causing more severe levels of burnout as it continues to accumulate (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989). Similarly, the burnout recovery literature suggests that there are considerable fluctuations in daily work attitudes that are impacted by prior experience, where recovering from burnout requires engagement in recovery activities (Sonnentag, 2003). In this case, past choices that led to burnout then influence the decision to engage in activities that lead to recovery. These activities, in turn, increase engagement and decrease burnout. Finally, totality is the idea that phenomena can be understood only in relation to other phenomena (e.g., observing burnout or engagement on its own would be an incomplete method unable to fully realize the range of interactions influencing behaviors).

7. Implications for theory

A dialectic approach embraces the nonlinear fluctuations implicit in the burnout–engagement interaction and provides a framework for examining the dynamic nature of this relationship in several theoretical contexts. Below, we discuss several of the most

common theories associated with the burnout and engagement literature including resource based models such as Conservation of Resources Theory (COR; [Hobfoll, 1988, 2001](#)), the Demand-Control Model, Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model as well as the Transaction Stress Model proposed by [Lazarus and Folkman \(1984\)](#).

7.1. Resource-based models

Resource-based models examine performance differences based on an individual's accumulated resources, generally defined as anything considered to contribute to positive outcomes within an individual ([Miles, 2012](#)). Resources act as a buffer against personal and environmental stressors such as job demands, role conflict, or engaging in an activity that requires sustained attention and effort ([Hobfoll, 1989; Nahrngang, Morgeson, & Hofmann, 2011; Rubino, Perry, Milam, Spitzmueller, & Zapf, 2012](#)). Resources are depleted over time as an individual employs them to address stressors, leading to burnout if resources aren't recovered; conversely, individuals can accumulate excess resources through investment and return ([Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008; Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Leiter, 1991, 1993; Meijman & Mulder, 1998](#)). Several models provide varied perspectives on the collection, employment, and depletion of resources, including Conservation of Resource Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model and the Job Demand–Control Model ([Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Karasek, 1979](#)). In general, these models assume that resources lead to higher states of work engagement and performance while demands cause burnout over time ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010](#)). As such, a resources–demands dialectic can be applied to each of these theories.

Evidence of a dialectic relationship already exists in some studies using the COR framework. [Hakanen et al. \(2005\)](#) found that resources are most beneficial in maintaining engagement when demands are high; speaking to the sub-dialectic of resources and demands that we propose drives the relationship between burnout and engagement. Further research observing a group of teachers showed that job resources particularly influenced engagement when the teachers were confronted with high levels of pupil misconduct ([Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthapoulou, 2007](#)).

From a burnout and engagement standpoint, the JD–R model assumes that job resources lead to higher states of work engagement and performance while demands cause burnout over time ([Bakker & Leiter, 2010](#)). Similarly, in the JD–R Model job demands (e.g., time pressure, uncertainty, workload) interact with job control factors (e.g., autonomy, decision latitude, flexible work hours) to predict strain. The main function of job resources in both models is to help employees deal with job demands. Additionally, job resources work intrinsically to foster employee growth and development or extrinsically to motivate employees to achieve work goals ([Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010](#)). Resources include physical, social, psychological, and organizational aspects of the job that help employees achieve work goals, reduce job demands and costs, and/or stimulate personal growth and development ([Nahrngang et al., 2011](#)). On the other hand, job demands include any physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained skill or effort to perform ([Nahrngang et al., 2011](#)). Sustained effort results in an expenditure of job resources in order to combat stressors caused by the demands. These stressors can cause psychological and physiological strains that can lead to burnout.

Upon a closer examination of the burnout–engagement relationship under these models, the resources–demands sub-dialectic intuitively emerges. Here, resources empower the employee to achieve an engagement state through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The engagement state acts against the employee's

concurrent state of burnout and the two interact to produce unique behaviors. Dialectics enhances the understanding of burnout and engagement as viewed through each theory by highlighting interactions between burnout and engagement as well as theoretically allowing for the presence of both constructs within an individual to produce unique behaviors.

7.2. Transaction Stress Model

One of the most prevalent stress models in modern literature is the Transactional Stress Model put forth by [Lazarus and Folkman \(1984\)](#). In this model, the relationship between outcome (e.g., burnout or engagement) and stress is mediated by appraisal of and coping with stressors in the environment. Environmental conditions are appraised as either threatening or challenging and determine the degree of stress experienced and the subsequent coping method. Appraisal is an evaluative process influenced by individual factors (e.g., self-efficacy, preferred coping styles, coping success) that classify events according to their features, significance, and impact on well-being ([Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987](#)). A primary and secondary appraisal occur where the individual decides whether or not he or she will be affected by the stressor and whether resources exist to cope with the stressor, respectively. Primary appraisal includes the identification of a stressor as stressful, relevant, or benign while secondary appraisal encompasses the evaluation of one's ability to cope given current levels of resources and demands ([Lazarus & Folkman, 1984](#)). Over time, the accrual of stress due to constant stressful appraisals or maladaptive coping techniques can lead to chronic mental or physical strain (e.g., burnout, illness ([Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986](#))).

Under the Transaction Stress Model, the dialectic perspective pushes scholars to consider several factors when considering the burnout–engagement relationship including the interaction between current levels of both burnout and engagement in environmental appraisals, holistic effects of available coping resources and environmental strains on predicting appraisal and coping decisions, and appraisal patterns and coping strategies over time as driven by resources and demands. Additionally, dialectics allows for the exploration of the ongoing tensions and contradictions that constitute the process by which individuals attempt to reconcile coping decisions based on available resources and demands. A richer understanding of the factors influencing decision making processes and outcomes can be achieved through the examination of these dynamic relationships, contributing to the collective knowledge of [Lazarus and Folkman's \(1984\)](#) original model.

8. Implications for future research

Traditional dialectic methodologies generally fall into the qualitative realm with many studies utilizing retrospective interviews or narratives in order to collect data from individual accounts of the observed relationship(s); however, mixed and quantitative research methods (e.g., network analysis, multilevel modeling, and systems approaches) are also employed to test theory and explore the validity of qualitative findings ([Miller, 2001; Miller et al., 2011; Monge, Farace, Eisenberg, Miller, & White, 1984; Poole, Van de Ven, Dooley, & Holmes, 2000](#)). Dialectic ideas and assumptions can be incorporated into existing methodologies and may be particularly useful in future attempts to resolve issues associated with construct development and labeling. For example, the concept of dialectics highlights the pitfalls of viewing two opposing constructs on a continuum by recognizing that a low presence of one variable in a relationship does not imply a high presence of the other (e.g., a low disengagement score on the MBI does not and should not

Table 1
Assumptions of dialectical theory – implications for burnout and engagement research.

Dialectic assumption	Implication for the burnout/engagement phenomenon	Applications for burnout/engagement research
Process	As suggested by existing empirical evidence, levels of burnout and engagement are dynamic and change over time.	Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs that captures fluctuation in both constructs (Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996)
Contradiction	A dynamic interplay between engagement and burnout can impact levels of both constructs in the present and the future	Individual variation in the length and severity of resource spirals may be explained by existing levels of the opposing construct within an individual (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2012)
Change	Varying levels of burnout and engagement within an individual produce unique outcomes.	Complex behaviors such as presenteeism may be explainable through a closer examination of co-existing individual levels of burnout and engagement (Demerouti et al., 2009)
Praxis	Praxis provides a framework for exploring reciprocal models of burnout and engagement. For example, praxis has been documented through gain and loss spirals and emphasizes the resources–demands sub-dialectic.	Future research should continue incorporating recursive models of burnout–engagement with relevant behavioral outcomes (Bakker & Leiter, 2010).
Totality	Burnout and engagement can be better understood when studied together. This will provide a more complete measure of interactions between both constructs and identify how one impacts the other.	Future research examining burnout or engagement should measure both constructs in order to identify more nuanced variation in behavioral outcomes resulting from different levels of burnout and engagement (Sonnentag, Mojza, Demerouti, & Bakker, 2012).

imply engagement). This example highlights the potential of a logical fallacy based on construct labeling and development where disengagement and engagement are assumed to be positioned as a bipolar pair of constructs. Obviously, low scores on disengagement items do not indicate high scores on engagement items (and vice versa).

Assumptions of relational dialectics (i.e., contradiction, process, change, praxis, and totality) also imply a state-based view of burnout and engagement characterized by a rapidly changing, complex relationship consisting of diverse, contradictory elements (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Dalal et al., 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Sonnentag et al., 2010). In a relational dialectic sense, fluid constructs often provide contradictory results, which are not seen as research failure; rather, they are considered partial evidence of multiple meaning systems (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Empirical support of conceptually diverse models of burnout and engagement suggests an underlying tension between the two constructs that merits further exploration (Table 1).

Currently, dialectics is most often employed in organizational communications research (although it is present in other disciplines, as well) using methods including individual interviews, site observations, archival data (e.g., performance appraisals, company earnings reports), and survey measures similar to empirical work in other fields of organizational behavior (Carlo et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2011). The purpose of data analysis in a dialectic study is to synthesize contradictory evidence by identifying opposing ideas and testing rival explanations (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For example, Carlo et al. (2012) applied dialectics to the struggle between mindful and mindless states of actors engaging in collective minding. By utilizing a series of qualitative and quantitative data techniques simultaneously over time, the authors were able to refine the analytical themes and categories and expand theory associated to collective minding. In a similar fashion, future research can incorporate dialectic reasoning to further expand our understanding of burnout and engagement in relation to various behaviors and environments.

Future research utilizing a dialectical framework should seek to measure both engagement and burnout simultaneously without assuming that the absence of one construct implies the presence of the other. Empirical measurement of these constructs is possible using existing survey measures (e.g., MBI, UWES). Additionally, qualitative evidence can be gathered through interviews, observations, diaries, or other methods to further determine how the two constructs interact when simultaneously present. A longitudinal

design would be necessary in order to accurately record fluctuations in both constructs over time, which is of central importance to dialectical research.

While scholars in the management field are quite familiar with longitudinal survey research and its methodology, the process of dialectical theory-based research deserves further explanation. Typically, studies employing a dialectical approach incorporate qualitative data from interviews, observations, or organizational documents and may take place over a period of several weeks or months (e.g., Baxter, 1990; Tracy, 2004b). Determining an appropriate length of time for data collection and measurement requires synthesis of existing theory coupled with empirical evidence in order to identify times where unbiased estimates of data can be gathered (Mitchell & James, 2001).

During data collection, scholars should immerse themselves in their research through close observation of their area of interest to record scenes and behaviors using multiple points of view (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Richardson, 2000). This can be a disruptive method for gathering data if the researcher is not cautious (e.g., if observing, the researcher should be as unobtrusive as possible); as such, scholars may need to self-reflexively account for their presence and role in the study (Eastland, 1993). Dialectic contradictions in the data can be identified through several methods, most notably through a grounded theory technique that emphasizes theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) through methods such as the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2001) or analysis of critical incidents (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After gathering more data through future empirical work, dialectic based interventions may be possible. Dialectic based interventions are usually centered around communication between parties with the goal of progressing relationships toward deeper and more intimate stages that encourage detailed and honest dialog (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). This type of intervention may be particularly useful for strengthening or repairing relationships between supervisors and subordinates, coworkers, or for new employees entering an organization.

9. Conclusion

Our goal has been to offer a new perspective toward the understanding of the burnout and engagement relationship through the introduction of Dialectic Theory. It takes into account the fluctuations of both constructs and provides logic for previously conflicting results present in the literature. Namely, dialectics

suggests a focus toward the interaction between burnout and engagement and the unique outcomes produced as a result. Further, it prompts researchers to reconsider the basic assumptions of the burnout–engagement relationship and focus on the interactions between the two constructs in order to explain subsequent behaviors. Dialectics offers a unique framework for the exploration of opposing constructs such as burnout and engagement and provides a new avenue for future research through integration into existing theories used to study both constructs.

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