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Over Engagement, Protective or Risk Factor of Burnout?

Josep M. Blanch, Paola Ochoa and Maria Fernanda Caballero

Abstract

Megatrends in the organization and management of work promote intensification and acceleration processes in the form of overload and overtime. These processes, in a framework of deregulation and individualization of labor relations, constitute burnout risk factors. To tackle this contemporary pandemic, the positive occupational psychology proposes engagement as a strategic resource for preventing that syndrome, delaying its appearance, or cushioning its effects. The present study is based on the suspicion that engagement, in addition to functioning as a means of protection against burnout, may also constitute a risk factor for this pathology. The purpose of its exposition is to contextualize, situate, and argue the logic of this approach, and to advance a response proposal to the question about in which circumstances the engagement constitutes a risk factor of burnout: in moderate doses, it works as a protective factor of burnout, while in excessive doses, it acts as a risk factor by hiding the warning signs of the syndrome.

Keywords: burnout, engagement, protective factor, risk factor, occupational health

1. Introduction

During the first decade of the century, a powerful line of empirical research and an equally influential dissemination device in the scientific and managerial fields, together with the positive psychology of organization and work, placed work engagement in the center of the disciplinary and professional scenario, playing the role of vaccine against the work burnout pandemic.

At the same time, a wide debate has been developing on the nature and specificity of the new construct, on its articulation with that of burnout, and on the metatheoretical background of its construction and application. Most of the discussion focuses not so much on the theoretical and practical utility of the construct, but on the criteria and precautions that should guide the theoretical explanation of the research results and the practical application of the intervention devices.

In general, the literature attributes to the engagement only positive functions of avoidance or minimization of the effects of burnout, reserving for other phenomena of high labor implication, such as workaholism, the role of risk factors of burnout. But this distinction does not seem sufficient to completely eliminate the doubt about whether engagement itself works like a risk factor for burnout. In this study, we will look for the circumstances in which the engagement may facilitate or mask the appearance of this pathology.

First, some macro trends in the world of work that constitute the emergency context of the burnout pandemic will be analyzed, with special emphasis on the naturalization of working conditions and the psychologization of the sources of the burnout. Then will be described some singular developments of positive psychology, travel companion of work engagement theory. Next, some relevant developments on work engagement and engaged workers in positive organizations will be presented, to end with a balance of the lights and shadows that appear in the current panorama of research and theory on the complex engagement-burnout articulation. On this basis, a re-reading of this relationship will be proposed: engagement works as a protective factor for burnout, when applied in moderate doses, and as a risk factor, if it is present in such excessive doses that they mask anticipatory warning signals from the irruption of the syndrome.

2. Labor macro trends and new work management

Recent studies have detected the emergence, on a global scale, of an epidemiological catastrophe of burnout driven by the combined effect of multiple vectors: first, the general dynamics of the labor market toward a scenario characterized by a constant increase in the quantitative and qualitative job demands, in a regime of temporary pressure to execute tasks quickly, and in the framework of an increasing uncertainty and insecurity in employment. This context determines the growing cognitive, emotional, social, and digital work overload in numerous professions, the generalized intensification and acceleration of working time and the corresponding decrease in the time devoted to rest, the dilution of boundaries between work spaces and times, and of nonlabor life, the labor colonization of nonlabor spaces and times, the progressive temporary and social precarization of employment contracts and the flexibilization, deregulation, and individualization of labor relations. In addition, the fulfillment of managerial objectives often demands an over commitment of the workers to the organization, which in the long run can lead to fatigue and exhaustion. This set of transformations constitutes a breeding ground for chronic work stress, considered the main psychosocial risk factor of burnout [1–5].

The last of the five-year reports on Living and Working Conditions in Europe [6] confirms the tendency already pointed out in previous surveys [51] to the significant and sustained increase in the declining European work paradise of the multiple perception of “working at great speed,” “with tight deadlines,” and with “feeling of general fatigue at work.” In the same line, the recent Work and Well-Being Survey, published by the American Psychological Association’s (APA’s) Center for Organizational Excellence of the American Psychological Association, detects in the United States a fatal combination of overwork, lack of rest time, and almost absence of a managerial culture sensitive to the perverse effects of such excesses and deficiencies for the health of both workers and companies [7]. In the same vein, the second ESENER report highlights the economic, social, and organizational relevance of psychosocial risks and their prevention, while at the same time reflecting a moderate attention given by European businessmen and managers toward occupational safety issues and a remarkably lower interest that they dedicate to the issues concerning the occupational health, as it is the case of the psychosocial risks [8]. For this reason, the International Labor Organization has proposed to change these mentalities, guiding labor policies at a global, regional, and state level not only regarding workers’ labor rights, but also regarding the prevention of occupational risks and the promotion of healthy and sustainable work environments [3, 9]. The World Health Organization itself has joined this task [10, 11].

The panorama described poses the challenge of balancing the functional imperatives of an organizational culture based on values and norms of the market company, such as efficiency and effectiveness, productivity and competitiveness, profitability and quality, cost-benefit analysis or evaluation by results, with human values, such as health and safety at work, occupational well-being and quality of working life. This difficult balance requires a double task: the effective prevention of the psychosocial risks of burnout and the promotion of healthy employees committed to their work.

The concern to prevent the general increase in work stress does not develop in a vacuum, but in the context of the metamorphosis of working conditions driven by the new neoliberal management. This hegemonic current generates a double effect, of objectification and subjectivation. On the one hand, it establishes working conditions under a *management by stress* regime that usually entails overload of work and temporary pressure, circumstances of risk of burnout. On the other, it transfers responsibility for the management of psychosocial risks from the employing organization to the employed person.

In this context, the psychology of work and its organization shows some lines of internal tension that express its theoretical and practical ambivalence when it comes to the evaluation and prevention of burnout: on the one hand, the orientation more sensitive to social factors explains the phenomenon as an effect of the psychological exhaustion experienced by the worker in given working conditions [12, 13], which the International Labour Office declares “indecent” [9]. Focused in this way, the promotion of engagement contributes to the prevention of burnout to the extent that it is combined with the performance of working conditions that determine chronic work stress. On the other, the most markedly clinical orientation of the discipline and the profession, which adopts the individual as an object of analysis and intervention, focuses on burnout above all as a matter of the same affected person, the agent and victim of the problem. In this sense, psychological wear is visualized as the expression of personal failure in coping with the labor demands that an organization imposes on its employees. The equivalent of this clinical approach to burnout presents engagement as an antagonist of burnout, placing it in the category of “personal resources” to effectively face those organizational demands. This clinical accent is more evident in the field of professional intervention in human talent management than in that of scientific research, which usually manages various combinations of resources located in the person and in the job [2, 13–21].

This identification of different “psychologies” of burnout (and engagement) justifies considering previously the links of engagement theories with the current of positive psychology and with its branch of positive organizational psychology.

3. Positive occupational psychology, background of the work engagement research and intervention

The traditional way of knowing production in psychology as a discipline and as a profession over the last century focused its object on mental illnesses, weaknesses, and dysfunctions. Placed in this context, the theory and the clinic of the burnout appear like manifestations of the *negative psychology* which conceives that upheaval like the pathological state to which a person arrived after to have remained a long time exposed to an excessive demand of work that could not or did not know how to face successfully. In contrast, the one related to engagement is inscribed in the line of *positive psychology* [22–24], based on a new approach of the human being that

does not focus on the pathology or the “ideology of the disease” [25] but in health and in the study of the phenomena and psychological processes that contribute to the well-being and happiness of people, orienting themselves toward the development of their strengths and the promotion of their optimal functioning [26]. According to Seligman [22], the main driver of the new approach, happy people get sick less, live longer, and function better in everyday life, in their social interactions, and at work. Within the framework of this new trend, promoted by the American Psychological Association (APA), positive occupational psychology studies that optimal functioning in the workplace to discover and promote the factors that allow and facilitate the prosperity of both employees and employers’ organizations [15, 17, 20, 27–31].

The psychology of burnout considers both the environmental and personal factors that affect the phenomenon, although with a certain emphasis on the latter. On the other hand, the psychology of engagement, without disregarding the weight of external variables, including both job demands and job resources and their interaction, emphasizes subjective and intrapersonal factors, presenting the same engagement as “state of mind” that is part of the “personal resources” to coping with the “organizational demands” [14–18, 20, 21].

The psychology of engagement is sensitive to the contagion of certain biases of positive psychology, its traveling companion, as its emphasis on adopting the intraindividual and merely subjective as the basic unit of analysis and intervention. One of the models that contributed to reinforce that radically psychological point of view was the one proposed by Boehm and Lyubomirsky [32] in their *Promise of Sustainable Happiness* published in the Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology. In this influential text, the authors start from the observation that traditionally philosophers, writers, gurus of all kinds, and scientists of the most diverse disciplines have considered well-being and happiness as dependent variables of objective external factors (such as, for example, living and working conditions). However, according to them, there is accumulated scientific evidence that what determines that some people are happier than others are not objective circumstances such as salary or marital status or even life events; that together “explain relatively little variation in people’s levels of well-being.” The key, according to them, is that “happy people are inclined to perceive and interpret their environment differently from their less happy peers.” For that reason, they explore “how an individual’s thoughts, behaviors, and motivations can explain their happiness over and above the mere objective circumstances of their life.” Their research leads them to conclude that happy individuals tend “to view the world relatively more positively and in a happiness-promoting way,” to “describe their previous life experiences (...) as more pleasant,” and “to use a positive perspective when evaluating themselves and others.”

According to its model of primary determinants of sustainable happiness, “three factors contribute to an individual’s chronic happiness level: (a) the set point, (b) life circumstances, and (c) intentional activities, or effortful acts that are naturally variable and episodic.” The authors dare to specify the coefficient of determination of each of these three influential factors: to the biophysiological base (set point) corresponds 50% of the causality on chronic happiness, to the life circumstances an insignificant 10%, and to the intentional activities 40%. On the set point, psychology has very little to do. Nor can much be done about external circumstances. Therefore, it is on this important 40% that research and intervention on well-being and happiness should focus. According to the authors, such intentional activities that include, for example, “committing acts of kindness, expressing gratitude or optimism, and savoring joyful life events,” represent “the most promising route to sustaining enhanced happiness.” In the text, they also describe half a dozen

“randomized controlled interventions testing the efficacy of each of these activities in raising and maintaining well-being, as well as the mediators and moderators underlying their effects.” His conclusion is that “less happy people can strive to be happier by learning a variety of effective strategies and practicing them with determination and commitment.” From this, it implicitly follows that there are no reasons for the unhappy, for objective labor causes to waste their time or spend their energies in trying to change working conditions that entail a high risk of burnout. The path to wellness goes through the development of those subjective strategies. In the nineteenth century, German idealist philosophy was criticized for having limited itself to “interpreting the world” when it was urgent to “transform” it. Here and now the opposite is proposed: There is no need to transform the world; it is enough to reinterpret it, subjectively and individually. In case there is any doubt of the metatheoretical positioning of this “promise of sustainable happiness,” in the frontispiece of the concluding remarks of the work is inscribed the well-known phrase of one of the philosophers of individualism, Henry David Thoreau: “Man is the artificer of his own happiness.”

This type of model provides the psychology of burnout with a “scientific” pretext to stop worrying about working conditions as psychosocial risk factors. It would be enough to change the subjective conditions from which each employee faces the objective demands of their organization. Binkley [33, 34] criticizes the radical “psychologism” of positive psychology of happiness for its connections with the program of the “government of neo-liberal interiority.” His study on “happiness as enterprise” is presented as “an essay on neoliberal life” [35]. In the same vein, Fabián and Stecher [36] consider this type of positive psychology as a “construction technology of the new neoliberal subject” and relate their new discourses on happiness with the “neoliberal governmentality” and its maxim slogan: “Dedicate yourself to being happy and everything else will follow.” For the historian Horowitz [37], the happiness studies promoted by positive psychology seem destined to persuade people that they can be happy even though the conditions of life, work, health, education, and wages are getting worse. Although not all the tendencies of the complex current of positive psychology assume with the same enthusiasm positions as individualistic as the one described, globally they progress in the same direction, questioning the traditional conception of well-being and happiness as effects derived from the conditions of life and moving precisely in the opposite direction: well-being and happiness lead to good results in life and work.

Understanding the conceptual articulation of the engagement model with that of burnout requires considering not only the theoretical implications of the important epistemic turn driven by positive psychology, but also those of that metatheoretical background of individualism underlying happiness studies. And this applies specially to models of work happiness based on the alleged “scientific evidence” that working conditions, as part of life circumstances, only determine 10% of job happiness. It seems unrealistic to claim that a person who goes to work every day to a company managed by stress, with a workday marked by task overload and temporary pressure, under a regime of contractually precarious employment, with low salary and minimum social protection, being object of racial discrimination, sexual harassment, mobbing, and third-party violence, can compensate those small inconveniences through a repertoire of magical rituals based on intentional activities as powerful as friendly faces, smiles of gratitude, refills of intrinsic motivation, or expressions on a role of experiences of happiness or good memories preserved. A conception of engagement as a mere personal resource for the individual management of burnout without touching the working conditions could appear as an expression of a psychology made to the measure of new management.

4. Work engagement and engaged workers in positive organizations

Kahn [38] used the term engagement to refer to the energy mobilized by certain employees who strive to achieve organizational goals and conceived this state as opposed to burnout. The psychology of engagement burst onto the scene in the period of transition to the new century as a new turn in research and theorization on burnout, and in parallel to the first developments in positive psychology, as a promise of production of healthy and productive workers for healthy, competitive, and sustainable organizations. With a new look of the human being focused less on its limitations and more on its potentialities, positive organizational psychology shifted attention from workers burned by exhaustion to those more vigorous and enthusiastic about their work [2, 39].

The implantation of the concept in occupational psychology went through an initial phase of some reasonable doubts raised about whether the new construct contributed something new and different with respect to others of the same semantic field already implanted in the discipline, such as those of job involvement, work commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, etc. [2]. At the beginning, Maslach and Leiter [12] presented a symmetrically opposed engagement model to that of burnout, explaining this pathological process as the erosion of a healthy state of engagement characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy. In this process of psychological deterioration, energy is transformed into exhaustion, participation in cynicism, and efficacy into inefficacy. Over time, the engagement adopted the clearly motivational construct format, which includes energy, activation, effort, perseverance, commitment, and intentionality. The extensive literature available allows for a schematic characterization of engagement, of engaged workers and their importance for the optimal functioning of healthy and positive organizations.

Work engagement was defined and operationalized as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” [40]. Vigor refers to “high levels of energy and resilience, the willingness to invest effort in one’s job, not being easily fatigued, and persistence in the face of difficulties”; dedication refers to “a strong involvement in one’s work, accompanied by feelings of enthusiasm and significance, and by a sense of pride and inspiration”; and absorption refers to “a pleasant state of total immersion in one’s work which is characterized by time passing quickly and being unable to detaching oneself from the job.”

The engagement, as a personal resource, has internal sources of energy such as intrinsic motivation and self-positive feedback; but it is also nourished by environmental factors, such as social support, positive leadership and coaching, performance feedback, task variety, and opportunities to learn and develop. In addition, the engagement is emotionally contagious within the organization and remains at high levels, because the same staff takes care of it, proactively modifying their work environment [14, 15, 19–21].

The literature identifies numerous characteristics of the engaged workers: they are active, autonomous, self-reliant, and self-responsible; have positive self-concept, self-evaluation, and self-esteem; have high levels of physical and mental health, well-being and quality of work life, emotional stability, performance, optimism, flexibility, adaptability, proactivity, prosociality, initiative, creativity, achievement motivation, and social skills and low levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout. They also show good performance, complain little, are rarely conflictive, and have more initiatives to solve problems related to the demands of work. In addition, they are well predisposed to the practice of job crafting, that is, to restructuring job demands and job resources to better meet organizational objectives, by creating

their own great place to work. They have a strong feeling of loyalty to the organization; so, they complain little, generate few tensions, and show a minimal intention to leave the job, the company, or the profession. By sharing and taking on the values of the organization, they commit themselves to them; so, they also require less supervision. Although they “sometimes feel tired,” they are at the same time “satisfied” of working and with their work [13–15, 19–21]. Precisely, the balance of the latest developments in the research reinforce the evidence of the “buffering role of various job resources on the relationship between job demands and burnout.” This new approach emphasizes the “role of the individual in modifying the impact of job demands and resources on motivation and energy, in the form of personal resources, job crafting, and self-undermining” [17].

Organizations with engaged workers enjoy multiple advantages, such as positive social climate; low levels of turnover, absenteeism, accidents, and conflicts; and high levels of productivity, innovation, and employee performance, all of which make them more competitive and sustainable [14, 15, 19, 20].

5. Lights and shadows of the work engagement model

The initial research on work engagement was developed almost in parallel with the design of the *Job Demands-Resources Model*—*JD-R*—which constitutes the most relevant contribution to the theoretical articulation of burnout-engagement. By *demands* is understood the set of quantitative and qualitative, cognitive, and emotional, physical, and social requirements of work, which involve psychological wear for the employee. The *resources* are the set of material, technical, organizational, and social devices and personal and professional skills available to cope with the job demands. The traditional version of the model explains and predicts burnout as an effect of the prolonged imbalance between high demands and low resources, characteristic of chronic work overload; situation that derives in disengagement, burnout, and malaise. This vicious combination is contrasted by a virtuous combination of high demands and high resources, generating health, well-being, and engagement effects (see **Table 1**).

The review of the extensive existing literature on the subject provides evidence that there is “distinctive pattern of antecedents and consequences of burnout and work engagement”: job demands appear as the main cause of burnout, poor health, and negative organizational outcomes. On the opposite pole, job resources appear as antecedents of work engagement, work well-being, and positive organizational outcomes. With the *JD-R* model, we can understand, explain, and make predictions about employee burnout, work engagement, and outcomes [14–17, 39].

The positive side of the robustness of the *JD-R* model is contrasted by a dark side in which, according to various critical views, converge deficiencies, ambiguities, contradictions, and unresolved issues in the engagement model, concerning identity and distinctiveness of engagement, limitations in terms of the levels of analysis applied in research on the subject and potential negative effects of engagement.

In general terms, with regard to the first aspect, it is debated whether the engagement refers to a substantive, specific, distinct, univocal, and nonredundant phenomenon with respect to burnout; on whether both constructs constitute two poles of a continuous or two sides of the same coin; about whether their relationship is one of complementarity, compensation, antipodality, antagonism, independence, interdependence, or dialectic and about how much each of them is stable and variable [41–43].

	Working conditions	Enabling factors	Personal outcomes	Organizational outcomes
Virtuous combination	High job demands combined with high (job and personal) resources	Job crafting Proactive physical and cognitive changes employees make in their task and job demands for a better achievement of organizational goals	Motivation Work engagement Job satisfaction Well-being Vigor Health Proactivity Flexibility Creativity ...	High job performance Achievement Productivity Competitiveness Efficiency Innovation Success Progress ...
Vicious combination	High job demands combined with low (job and personal) resources	Self-undermining Negative: self-evaluation self-esteem self-efficacy expectations ...	Strain Work disengagement Job dissatisfaction Malaise Exhaustion Burnout Anxiety Depression Insecurity ...	Low job performance Failure Errors Absenteeism Turnover Conflicts Accidents Injuries ...

Inspired by [14–17, 39].

Table 1.
Aspects of the JD-R model.

Regarding the second, conventional research on work engagement usually moves through the sphere of the individual and rarely exceeds the organizational level. This reduction in the analysis and explanation of complex and multidimensional phenomena to its more intraindividual facet is criticized for its effects of “psychologization,” which lead to minimize the role of working conditions as a set of ecological, material, technical, economic, social, political, legal, and organizational circumstances within the framework of which activity and labor relations are developed. Such circumstances are not limited to “job demands.” They constitute the context in which these demands are produced and dealt with. On a more general level, the literature on the subject rarely considers variables and factors corresponding to the sociocultural, political-legal, economic, and ideological macro-context, which is the matrix of the organizational culture, management models and values, norms, attitudes, and individual motivations that inspire and nourish work engagement [33–37].

The third point connects especially with the focus of interest of this chapter: With all the accumulated information, has any kind of evidence been built about eventual negative, perverse, or collateral psychosocial effects of work engagement? Have people been detected who, being strongly committed to their work and involved with the values and norms of their organization, have gone through processes of depression or burnout for work reasons? According to the mainstream literature, this type of phenomenon must be attributed not to work engagement, but to “workaholics,” a form of addictive behavior motivated by the compulsion to work excessively and incessantly that involves a high level of commitment to the work that it seems, but it is not confused with work engagement. Workaholic’s behavior is associated with low levels of health, job satisfaction and quality of social relations; the opposite as in work engagement [44–50].

6. Over engagement, protective or risk factor of burnout?

The conceptual and operational differentiation between work engagement and workaholics serves to put on the positive plate of the balance all the effects of the work engagement and on the negative those of the workaholics, as well as to obtain consistent empirical results from the application of standardized evaluation instruments of both constructs. The panorama seems so simple, clear, and perfect that it almost leaves no room for doubt.

But the results of empirical research that we have been carrying out with public attention services personnel, mainly from the worlds of the academy and the health and justice services [51–54], lead us to suspect that, in the empirical level, things are less clear than in the constructs: (a) In the context of interview and focus group, we have more difficulty distinguishing the indicators of engagement from workaholics than when we read texts on the subject. (b) The survey shows satisfied professionals above all for the material, technical, and social resources available to them and, at the same time, discomfort due to their job conditions regarding work overload and temporary pressure. In the survey, we apply standardized instruments for assessing working conditions, work well-being, burnout, and engagement. The results allow us to identify an irreducible sector of around 20% of the surveyed personnel that gives high scores in both burnout and engagement (not workaholics). A staff often so work engaged that, in natural contexts of returning results to people and groups that had requested it, they have difficulty to recognize how exhausted they really are. Which leads us to an interpretation not in accordance with the mainstream: in many of these cases, work engagement, rather than protecting from burnout, masks it, postponing the moment of becoming aware of it and confronting it proactively. In this circumstance, work engagement could work as a psychosocial risk factor for burnout with a delayed effect.

How to reconcile this interpretation with the consensus generated among most researchers on the role of engagement as a protector of burnout? A possible

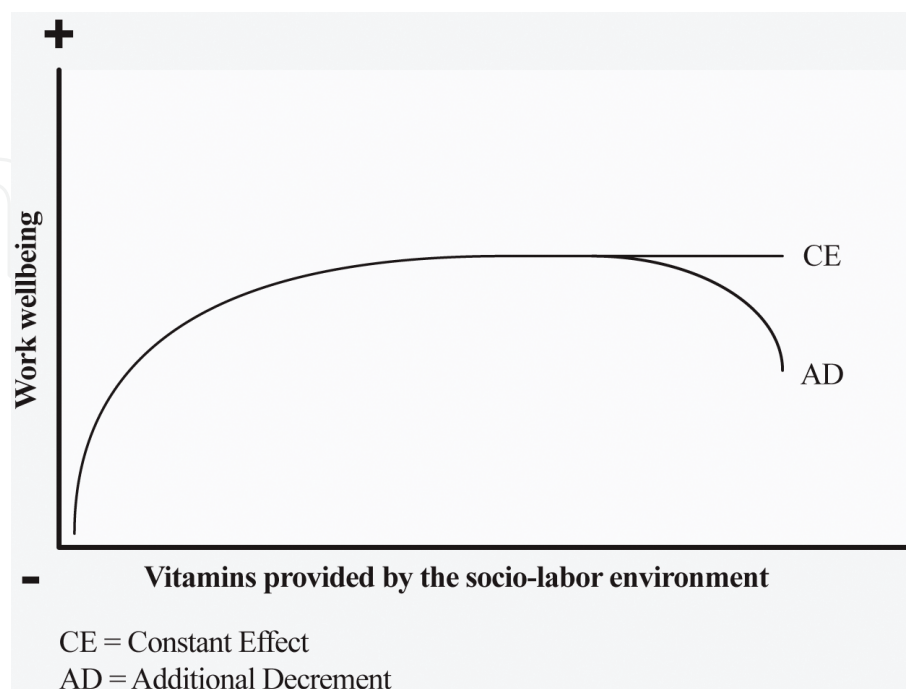


Figure 1. Socio-labor environment and work well-being. Source: [55, 56].

answer to this question is provided by Warr's vitamin model [55, 56] on the socio-occupational determinants of psychological well-being, inspired by the role played by vitamins in the physical health of organisms (See **Figure 1**).

The application of this model allows to conceive the stress in the employment in terms of toxic effects attributable to hypervitaminosis due to over-demand of work and the one that occurs in unemployment because of psychosocial hypovitaminosis due to deficit of environmental features. Applying the same logic to the field of the relationship between work engagement and burnout, a vitamin deficit of engagement makes the person more vulnerable to burnout. An optimal level of such vitamin effectively prevents burnout, and an excessive level of engagement (not workaholics) could work as a risk factor for burnout by blocking alert signals and allowing the person to continue accumulating fatigue. This interpretation, still in the initial phase of formulation, has relevance in the double plane of theory and practice, which opens the way for future studies and developments in this field.

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