

**Opinion**

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# Work Addiction is not New to the Psychological Literature and has Evolved over Time



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**Opinion**

In a recent edition of the journal *Addiction*, Kardefelt-Winther et al. [1] drew attention to the conceptualization and assessment of behavioural addiction and argued that it may lead to pathologizing of common activities. One such example provided by the authors was work addiction. Consequently, readers might have been left with the impression that work addiction is a newly developed concept. However, this is not the case. The occurrence of psychosomatic symptoms on days where individuals were unable to work can be traced back to 1919 [2], while the formal notion of work addiction entered the psychological literature almost 50 years ago following the publication of Oates' seminal book, *Confessions of a Workaholic* [3] with a large increase in papers on the disorder over the last 30 years [4]. Consequently, work addiction is not a recently identified problem. Furthermore, work addiction also fits well into Kardefelt-Winther et al.'s [1] conceptualization of a behavioural addiction. More specifically, three principal observations are worth noting.

Firstly, there has been a relatively long period of a person-centred approach to research, from the initial recognition of a potential disorder comprising case studies and qualitative studies. These studies explored the phenomenology of the work addiction, identifying its aetiology and course [3,5] and proposed theories based on family dysfunction and personality predispositions, as well as models based on learning theory, cognitive theories, and addiction theory [5-7]. Therefore, in the initial stage of the concept development the problem was not atheoretical. On the contrary, there was a plethora of theories but they lacked integration of the findings and frameworks. Secondly, assessment instruments have been developed and evaluated in terms of their psychometric properties [4-8]. This has led to scales [9] being developed based on common addiction components [10] resulting in a slowly emerging consensus

defining work addiction as a behavioural addiction rather than a form of positive high engagement [4-7,11,12].

What follows is the postulate that good theory articulates not only what a construct is, but also what it is not. The process of clarifying conceptualisations of work addiction took decades of empirical research in many countries comprising both eastern and western cultures [4,6-7,11,12]. There is now agreement among researchers about differences between passionate work engagement and work addiction [4-7,11-15]. Although research shows comorbidity of work addiction with other psychopathologies [16], work addiction has its own phenomenology and aetiology, congruent with other addictions [17].

Finally, the criteria of the persistence of the disorder and of long-term impairment due to harm and distress were suggested by Kardefelt-Winther et al. as crucial for recognizing behaviour as addictive. Two sources of evidence for fulfilment of both of these criteria should be taken into account when it comes to work addiction. Firstly, the large number of case studies and clinical observations, and qualitative research data [3,5], and secondly, longitudinal empirical studies [14,15,18,19] showing that it is not a transient behavioural pattern and leads to significant impairment [3-7,11,13]. Additionally, Workaholics Anonymous groups have operated in several countries internationally for more than 30 years [5]. These groups demonstrate there are people who seek help because they recognize persistent problems that significantly impair their functioning. Admittedly, some researchers draw attention to the cultural renunciation and often ridicule of the concept of work addiction in mass media [5]. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the disowning of the construct by society might be a problem inherent to workaholicism research, and conceivably this reluctance to widely acknowledge the matter should itself be systematically studied.

Research on work addiction is beyond the phase of 'proof of concept' and research has shown that for a minority of individuals there is evidence of compulsive repeated over-involvement in work, persisting over a long time, different from passion or healthy high engagement, and related to long-term impairment due to harm and distress. Taking this into account, it seems worthwhile to suggest that the field would greatly benefit from an open discussion and integration of knowledge about work addiction studied within the addiction framework. This could include developing more consensus about what is already known about workaholism as well as delineating the crucial directions for immediate and long-term future research. Such discussions may stimulate and/or facilitate a more dynamic development of the field, parallel to the one observed in other domains of behavioural addictions, such as internet gaming addiction [20], which has significantly shorter history of research than work addiction.

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