



Work Addiction and Workaholism Are Different Constructs — a Personal Overview and Response to Atroszko (2024)

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Accepted: 11 June 2024

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I was interested to read the recent commentary by my good colleague Pawel Atroszko arguing that work addiction and workaholism are synonymous (Atroszko, 2024) based on his critique of the literature review by Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė (2023). Pawel and I agree on many things in the area of work addiction given that we have already jointly published nine peer-reviewed papers together on work addiction and/or study addiction (a pre-cursor to work addiction). However, my own view is that while there is clearly a lot of overlap between workaholism and work addiction, they are two different constructs. This is based on both the empirical literature and my own personal experience of being a ‘happy workaholic’ for most of my working life.

In his paper, Pawel asserted that “*an overwhelming majority of researchers (almost all), including the most prolific authors in the field (Andreassen et al., 2018; Robinson, 1999, 2014), use these terms [workaholism and work addiction] as synonyms (see Atroszko et al., 2019)*”. There are a number of points I would make in relation to this sentence. Firstly, while Bryan E. Robinson is indeed (by any definition) a prolific author, he is not prolific in the field of work addiction/workaholism with only a handful of peer-reviewed papers on the topic. Secondly, Cecile Andreassen is also cited who has published approximately 20 peer-reviewed papers in this area. She may be a prolific but she, her colleagues at the University of Bergen, and I co-developed the Bergen Work Addiction Scale (Andreassen et al., 2012) specifically to differentiate workaholism from work addiction (because some conceptualizations of workaholism included positive constructs). Moreover, the sentence also asserted that most researchers in this field view work addiction and workaholism as synonyms. The reference used to support this assertion (i.e., Atroszko et al., 2019) is a paper that I co-wrote with

Pawel and the word ‘workaholism’ was only mentioned once in the text and this was nothing to do with most researchers in the field using the two terms synonymously.

In 2018, Pawel and I co-authored a deliberately provocative paper ‘Ten myths about work addiction’ (Griffiths et al., 2018). Pawel’s position on this issue may have changed since then, but one of the things we argued in that paper was that work addiction and workaholism are not the same thing. We used our own empirical findings to argue that our research (both joint and separately) was theoretically grounded in the behavioural addiction literature and that work addiction ultimately resulted in negative and detrimental effects for the individual. This was contrasted with ‘workaholism’ which has a much wider range of theoretical underpinnings where in some research, the construct can sometimes be seen as positive rather than negative. We also made the point that the term ‘workaholic’ is used by individuals in everyday common language to describe those workers are very engaged. I have also made the argument that the construct of ‘workaholism’ and that it is more akin to excessive working more generally, regardless of whether there are advantageous or disadvantageous consequences (Griffiths, 2011). Because of this, we argued that use of the term should be limited in the work addiction literature because of its use as meaning very high and intense work involvement irrespective of whether it is good or bad for the individual.

It is very clear that working very hard and excessively is not the same as work addiction (Griffiths, 2024) and that ‘hyper performers’ are sometimes viewed as workaholics (Korn et al., 1987; Peiperl & Jones, 2001). Moreover, there are numerous examples of empirical studies that refer to ‘achievement-oriented workaholics’, ‘enthusiastic workaholics’, ‘engaged workaholics’, ‘happy workaholics’ and ‘committed workaholics’ where few such individuals experience negative consequences due to excessive working (e.g., Bonebright et al., 2000; Friedman & Lobel, 2003; Killinger, 1992; Spence & Robbins, 1992). All of these could be described more realistically as ‘happy hard workers’ who are *“strongly and intrinsically motivated, content with their style of working, enjoy their passionate involvement, are happy to exceed the demands of the job, and are typically professionally rewarded...[these] workaholics simply represent an extreme case of work commitment”* (Buelens & Poelmans, 2004; p.443). Arguably, it would be an oxymoron to describe an individual as a ‘happy work addict’ or an ‘enthusiastic work addict’ whereas few people (scholars or otherwise) would find it strange to term someone as an ‘enthusiastic workaholic’. This because ‘work addiction’ and ‘workaholism’ are not the same either empirically or clinically. In short, empirical studies that posit the existence of ‘happy’ or ‘enthusiastic’ workaholics are arguably not viewing workaholism as a behavioural addiction but an activity that the individual enjoys doing excessively.

Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė (2023) may not have argued their case for workaholism and work addiction being separate constructs as well as they could have but that does not mean their conclusion was wrong. One of the shortcomings of the review by Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė was that their review only included studies from 2008 onwards but the literature on workaholism and work addiction dates back over 50 years. Many seminal studies on workaholism which included positive aspect of workaholism were carried out prior to 2008.

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