CLOSER TO ENGAGING: A SURVEY OF THE TWO DOMINANT VIEWS OF ENGAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Despite an increase in research on work engagement, the construct is in a state of divergence. The issue is primarily the result of several competing models of engagement. To examine and better understand this phenomenon, this paper empirically compared and contrasted the two dominant views of work engagement. The first view describes engagement in three dimensions of physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The second model examines engagement by the dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption. As expected, the results show a positive correlation between composites of the two scales. But, a confirmatory factor analysis showed discriminant validity issues may exist between the dimensions of the second operationalization.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, management scholars have witnessed an increase in research in positive organizational behavior. One example of this is the developing body of work on engagement. Academic research has made substantial progress validating engagement as a broad "inclusive" motivational state, which is useful in explaining and predicting work behaviors (Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006). Work engagement is said to provide a more comprehensive explanation of workplace behaviors compared to established attitudinal constructs (e.g., job involvement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment) that tend to offer narrower interpretations (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Engagement has be shown to influence several individual-level behaviors such as task performance (Bakker, Demerouti, Brummelhuis, 2011; Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Rich et al., 2010) and extra-role behaviors (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006). It has also been supported as reducing employee turnover and accidents (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006). Accordingly, many practitioners have become interested in increasing engagement among their employees with an expectation of superior returns (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Gruman & Saks, 2011; Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008).

Despite a substantial increase in engagement research, it is frequently surrounded by disagreement and misunderstanding (e.g. Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2008; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011). This confusion is largely generated by the existence of multiple, sometimes competing, views of engagement. These issues originate from a variety of arguments (e.g., semantic, conceptual, nomological, or operational). For example, there is confusion created by the assortment of modifiers (e.g., work, job, employee, or task engagement) used in conjunction with engagement. Although these modifiers seem to be used

interchangeably, it is not clear that the objective underlying their varied use supports such indiscriminant usage. At a foundational level, there remains lingering debate as to the basic nature of the construct. In various treatments, it has been viewed as a state, a trait, or as a behavior (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Such inconsistencies result in recurrent semantic misinterpretation, and create noise that impedes the scientific progression of engagement theory.

As a step toward remedying the confusion, Macey and Schneider (2008) initiated a published dialogue regarding the competing views of engagement. The variety of responses to Macey and Schneider not only illustrated a divergence of opinions about defining engagement, but also drew attention to the fact that different conceptualizations of engagement necessitate varying multidimensional views. Saks (2008) commented that rather than clarifying the nature of engagement and establishing its unique place in organizational research, the general outcome is an imprecise definition consisting of other more established constructs in a repackaged form.

However, rather than merely being critical, Saks (2008) pointed out there are a few theoretical frameworks that could lead to a more precise, refined, and integrated model of engagement. As evidenced through commentaries following Macey and Schneider's article (2008), and through a general review of extant literature, it becomes apparent that the multitude of views on engagement can be traced back to two dominant perspectives. One stream of research is based on the ethnographic work of Kahn (1990; 1992) and his concept of personal engagement, while the other stream is firmly grounded in the work of several European scholars (e.g., , Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker & Lloret, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, 2004) who view engagement as a positive, multidimensional motivational state. These two perspectives have developed relatively independently of one another, but a closer examination reveals conceptual and operational similarities.

To facilitate future research and gain clarity, the goals of this paper were to critique the contributions of previous research, and compare the two dominant approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing work engagement.

EARLY RESEARCH

In 1990, the concept of personal engagement was introduced by William Kahn. His work borrowed greatly from Hackman and Oldham's (1976) job characteristics model. Kahn's work centers on the effect of situational factors (e.g., work elements, social systems, and individual distractions) on three separate psychological conditions (i.e., meaningfulness, safety, and availability). An increase any of the psychological predictors leads to moments of personal engagement with work. These moments involve individuals dedicating their full physical, cognitive, and emotional resources to their work role performance. Thus, by Kahn's description, moments of engagement result in behavioral expressions of workers who are deeply and personally connected to their work roles (Kahn, 1990; 1992). Within his qualitative work, Kahn did not provide an operationalized definition to measure personal engagement. This fact, along with the difficult task of measuring moments of engagement, help to explain why research based on Kahn's conceptualization of engagement remained somewhat dormant for several years and received only marginal attention from academic and practitioner communities.

Shortly before the turn of the millennium, interest in engagement started to dramatically increase due to the work of Wilmar B. Schaufeli and Arnold B. Bakker, who initiated a similar but separate stream of engagement research. This new wave of research resulted in a body of work that reflects Kahn's seminal conceptualization of engagement, but also diverged in a few important ways. Their view of engagement evolved from research on burnout, and rather than address those discrete, behavioral moments of physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement

described by Kahn, they have a tendency to view engagement as an enduring positive state (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). The result was a conceptualization of engagement as energy and identification at work, similar to what is experienced in flow. The popularity of this version of engagement resulted in the development of the most widely used measure of engagement to date, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which assesses individual's reported work-related vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Other research, beyond the two dominant streams, has focused mainly on increasing work engagement. In some cases, this added to the confusion. For instance, the concept has been eagerly embraced by numerous private consulting firms. Each firm began offering programs for increasing levels of engagement among employees. Mainstream and popular press treatments of engagement, and many technical reports, based on this approach tend to take a simplistic view of engagement as an outcome, rather than utilizing the common academic view of engagement as a mediating, motivational variable that explains the relationship between situational or individual predictors and behavioral outcomes (Wefald & Downey, 2009). Furthermore, because most consulting firms follow an overall differentiated strategy, engagement has been defined by practitioners in numerous ways with the goal being to gain a competitive advantage over the competition (e.g., Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004; Sirota, Mischkind, & Meltzer, 2005; Towers-Perrin, 2003). The result is a proliferation of vastly different, and rarely validated, conceptualizations of engagement. Macey and Schneider (2008, p. 5) noted as much in stating that since its inception, "engagement has been used to refer to a psychological state (e.g., involvement, commitment, attachment, mood), performance construct (e.g., either effort or observable behavior, including pro-social and organizational citizenship behavior [OCB]), disposition (e.g., positive affect [PA]), or some combination of the above."

This brief overview of the emerging stages of engagement research illustrates that although the concept seems to be promising for both academics and practitioners, there is much work left to do in establishing a unified theory, an integrated network of antecedents and consequences, and formulating a viable process driven framework that incorporates the various pieces of these separate streams. To that end, the next section details the intricacies of the two dominant frameworks, and identifies points of agreement and points of departure between the two.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ENGAGEMENT

Engagement was defined originally by Kahn as the "harnessing of organization members' selves in their work roles," (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Kahn and subsequent research based on his conceptualization predominantly treat engagement as a higher-order construct that is said to have three components, or expressions. Engaged employees express themselves in their work roles physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Christian et al., 2011; Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). The three behavioral manifestations (i.e. physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement) are influenced by three psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Based on Kahn's model of engagement, the psychological conditions mediate the relationship between situational or individual predictors and engagement. Psychological meaningfulness refers to the extent an employee believes his or her job is important, based primarily on the employee's own values (Renn and Vandenberg, 1995; May et al., 2004). Psychological safety exists when an employee can express himself or herself in work roles without the fear of unwarranted negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). Psychological availability occurs when the employee has the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to invest in his or her work roles (Kahn, 1990). Thus, an employee should engage in a work role when he or she: (1)

perceives the work role as being significant; (2) feels safe in performing the work role; and (3) has the available physical, cognitive, and emotional resources to perform the work role.

An empirical test of Kahn's three psychological conditions influence on engagement was conducted by May, Gilson, and Harter in 2004. The results revealed that all three conditions have a positive relationship with engagement, with meaningfulness having the strongest relationship. The examined predictors of these psychological conditions were all situational variables, and those found to have a positive relationship were: job enrichment and work role fit (*psychological meaningfulness*); rewarding co-worker and supportive supervisor relations (*psychological safety*); and personal resources (*psychological availability*). Overall, May et al. (2004) supported Kahn's conceptualization. Furthermore, the mediating role of the three psychological conditions between situational antecedents and work engagement is a major point of differentiation between Kahn's work, and that of UWES researchers.

From the UWES view, engagement is positive motivational state that is most effectively measured via three dimensions (Shaufeli et al., 2002; Shaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). Unlike Kahn's view, these dimensions are directly affected by distal antecedents rather than through a mediated mechanism involving the psychological conditions. Until recently, engagement in this stream of research was often treated as the antipode of job burnout (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Largely based on the design of the UWES measure, burnout and engagement are considered highly negatively correlated and distinct constructs (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Based on the UWES conceptualization, a high level of engagement is when an employee has more energy at work, which is characterized by three different dimensions: (1) vigor; (2) dedication; and (3) absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2009). "Vigor is

characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence also in the face of difficulties. Dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295)." Recent UWES research suggests that vigor and dedication may better describe the core dimensions of engagement and that absorption may relate more to the notion of flow (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

METHODS

Sample

Participants were full-time working adults in the midwest region of the United States. The subjects were surveyed online using Qualtrics software. The sampling method was student-recruited sampling. Student-recruited sampling is widely accepted, especially when collecting survey data (Demerouti & Rispens, 2014; Hochwarter, 2014). A recent meta-analysis of traditional and student-recruited sampling in engagement studies, conducted by Wheeler et al. (2014), did not find a significant difference in the observed relationships based on the sampling method.

As recommended when using student-recruited sampling, we provided students with instructions for the data collection process and a preferred demographic for participants (Demerouti & Rispens, 2014; Hochwarter, 2014; Wheeler et al., 2014). Undergraduate students received extra credit for recruiting working-adults to take the survey. All of the participants in the surveys were over the age of 21 and had at least 2 years of work experience. Based on the average time to complete the survey, which was 20.2 minutes (SD = 5.2), it was determined by

the researchers that any survey time less than 5 minutes (i.e., 3 standard deviations less than the mean completion time) could not be considered valid and was removed. Of the 352 completed surveys, 325 were retained for analysis.

The average age of participants in the survey was 34.9 years (*SD* = 14.6), with 75.7 percent being Caucasian, and 51.1 percent being female. Mean work experience was 15.9 years (*SD = 13.6*), mean organizational tenure was 8.3 years (*SD* = 9.1) and job tenure was 7.1 years (*SD* = 8.7). The respondents reported that 52.6 percent were in supervisor roles and 61.5 percent had some level of college education. Industries represented within the sample were reported as service (30 percent), manufacturing (18 percent), health and social care (13 percent), education (13 percent), finance and insurance (8 percent), media and technology (4 percent) and other (14 percent).

Measures

All scales utilized a 7 point Likert scale with response options ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 7="strongly agree".

Engagement (Kahn) was measured with an 18-item scale from Rich, LePine, and Crawford (2010) that captures three dimensions of engagement (*physical, emotional*, and *cognitive*). Responses were averaged to derive an overall level of engagement. Sample items were: "I work with intensity on my job" (*physical*); "I am enthusiastic in my job" (*emotional*); and "At work, my mind is focused on my job" (*cognitive*). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .93 (*physical engagement*), .94 (*emotional engagement*), .95 (*cognitive engagement*), .97 (*composite*).

Engagement (UWES) was examined with a 17-item scale from Schaufeli & Bakker, (2003). All three dimensions of engagement (*vigor, dedication, and absorption*) are measured.

Sample items were: ”At my work, I feel bursting with energy (*vigor*)”; “I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (*dedication*)”; “When I am working, I forget everything else around me (*absorption*)”. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .81 (*vigor*), .90 (*dedication*), .83 (*absorption*), .93 (*composite*).

RESULTS

Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations for each of the variables in this study. Scale reliabilities (alphas) are displayed along the main diagonal. Engagement is presented by its dimensions and as a composite. As expected, all variables in the models correlate at significant levels. One interesting point is the two composite engagement scales correlate at only .73. All reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha) are within acceptable ranges.

Insert Table 2 about here

Next, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure that all items generated significant loadings on their construct of interest, that the constructs demonstrated adequate convergent and discriminant validity, and that the model generated good fit. Standardized factor loadings of both Model 1 and Model 2 ranged from .66 to .96 and all were significant at $p < .05$. Next, discriminant validity was examined by calculating and comparing each variable’s composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminate validity is shown by comparing the AVE to the squared correlation of each pair of variables, if AVE exceeds the squared correlation, then discriminant validity is demonstrated. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Insert Table 3 about here

Variables showing no support for discriminant validity were vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Convergent validity can also be determined by comparing CR to AVE. According to Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010), if CR is greater than AVE then there is support for convergent validity. Finally, the fit statistics were compared for each model. The fit of the CFA for Model 1 (χ^2 = 1321.21, *df* = 449, $p < .001$; CFI = .90, RMSEA = .07) and Model 2 (χ^2 = 1437.02, *df* = 419, $p < .001$; CFI = .86, RMSEA = .07) were acceptable.

Also, due to the self-report nature of our data, we investigated the potential for common-method variance or CMV (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Systematic error attributed to CMV was tested for by using the common latent factor method. The concept of this analysis is to force all indicators of latent variables to load on one common latent variable. The difference in standardized regression weights are analyzed for a model with a common latent variable and a model without a common latent variable. For this study there was no significant difference in the standardized regression weights between the two models, which suggests that CMV was not an issue.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we sought to examine the two dominant models of work engagement. The hope is that testing the two dominant models may resolve some misunderstandings surrounding the construct of engagement. While progress has been made in engagement research, significant shortcomings in our understanding of this phenomenon still exist. A precise and commonly accepted definition of the construct remains elusive. Its relationship to contextual, attitudinal, and behavioral variables is being established but in two separate streams of research.

The findings in this study support both conceptualizations of engagement and the high correlation between the composites suggest both operationalizations are measuring a similar construct. We also found support for the conceptualization of engagement as multidimensional.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Engagement will continue to be a significant management construct because of its utility, extension, and generalizability. It has both general characteristics that can be applied to any work role and characteristics that can help differentiate certain methods for improving management practices for specific work roles. Engagement's practicality is that it increases our ability to explain employee motivation and thereby predict future behavior. However, confusion over the definition and conceptual foundation of the construct threatens to weaken its predictive power.

One of the first issues with engagement research that needs attention or mutual agreement is what we call the construct? As stated in the introduction, engagement has had several different modifiers in the management literature. Researchers should explicitly state the type of engagement being studied, and the scope of its application. Individuals can be engaged in (1) work roles (work engagement); (2) individual tasks (task engagement); (3) overall job (job engagement); or (4) both job and off-the-job factors (employee engagement). Accordingly, future studies need to more explicitly and deliberately match the scope of the engagement construct with the scope of the outcomes of interest (e.g., task, role, extra-role, and job performance).

Work roles may provide the best level of measure for engagement research, in terms of interpretation of the effects and practical application of theory. For example, if we want to examine a university faculty member's level of engagement, it makes logical sense to concentrate on work roles because most faculty members have three clearly defined roles (i.e. research, teaching, and service). This would result in the most appropriate level of generalizability because tasks may differ among faculty members but work roles remain constant throughout academic fields. Also, describing a faculty member's engagement at the job level

may be too general and a task level analysis may be too narrow. The same is not true for the time period in which engagement data is sampled (i.e. day, week, month, or year). Recent research focused on daily levels of engagement has shown that even though engagement is conceptualized as a state it still fluctuates daily based on situational variables.

Perhaps the most fertile ground for future engagement research lies in the areas of understanding the *process* by which individuals become engaged and/or disengaged from their work. For instance, research evolving from Kahn's conceptualization typically has not addressed processes of disengagement. And, some research has viewed engagement as simply the opposite of burnout. This fails to account for the possibility that individuals may be engaged with some aspects of their work, disengaged from others, and "burned out" of others. To equate disengagement with burnout may ignore some important processes that might be taking place within the employee's role. Disengagement may instead be defined as simply a reduction of engagement.

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Table 1 - Comparison of Engagement's Predictors and Dimensions

Psychological Conditions (Kahn, 1990)	Dimensions (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004)
Psychological Meaningfulness - refers to the extent an employee believes his or her job is significant based on the employee's own values	*Vigor* - high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence also in the face of difficulties.
Psychological Safety - is defined as being able to express one's self in work roles without the fear of unjustified negative consequences	*Dedication* - characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge in one's work
Psychological Availability - is having the physical, emotional, or psychological resources to invest in one's work roles	*Absorption* - characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work

Table 2 - Comparison of Engagement's Correlations and Reliabilities

Construct/Dimension	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Physical Engagement	4.39	0.65	**(.93)**							
2. Emotional Engagement	4.29	0.68	0.80*	**(.94)**						
3. Cognitive Engagement	4.3	0.69	0.85*	0.78*	**(.95)**					
4. Composite Engagement (Kahn)	4.33	0.63	0.94*	0.92*	0.94*	**(.97)**				
5. Vigor	3.84	0.6	0.58*	0.69*	0.63*	0.68*	**(.81)**			
6. Dedication	4.06	0.73	0.63*	0.79*	0.64*	0.73*	0.78*	**(.90)**		
7. Absorption	3.69	0.68	0.53*	0.57*	0.58*	0.59*	0.78*	0.72*	**(.83)**	
8. Composite Engagement (UWES)	3.85	0.61	0.63*	0.74*	0.67*	0.73*	0.93*	0.90*	0.92*	**(.93)**

Table 3 Composite Reliabilities and AVE

		Mean	S.D.	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6
X1	Physical Engagement	4.39	0.65	**.94/.73**	0.65	0.72	0.33	0.39	0.28
X2	Emotional Engagement	4.30	0.69	0.80	**.94/.73**	0.61	0.48	0.63	0.32
X3	Cognitive Engagement	4.30	0.69	0.85	0.78	**.95/.78**	0.39	0.41	0.34
X4	Vigor	3.84	0.60	0.58	0.69	0.63	**.82/.43**	0.61	0.60
X5	Dedication	4.06	0.73	0.63	0.79	0.64	0.78	**.90/.65**	0.52
X6	Absorption	3.69	0.68	0.53	0.57	0.58	0.78	0.72	**.83/.46**
Composite Reliabilities and (Avg. Var. Extracted) are shown in bold on the Diagonal									
Correlations are shown on the lower matrix while squared correlations are shown on the upper matrix									
Discriminate validity is shown by comparing the AVE to the squared correlation									
If AVE exceeds the squared correlation, then discriminant validity is demonstrated.									