Engagement:
Where has all the 'power' gone?

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This article examines power and engagement. Since Kahn first explained engagement as the way people invest themselves in their work roles based on influence and role status, the engagement movement has subsequently experienced particular momentum both in academic and practitioner circles. The extensive body of evidence on engagement suggests that it is linked to a range of organizational outcomes as well as work-related measures of individual well-being. However, this evidence draws mainly from concepts and theories grounded in psychology and therefore important issues of context are often neglected. Moreover, the way engagement has been conceptualized reflects a particular gap in relation to the concept of power and tends to gloss over the realities of organizational life. We consider this limitation of the evidence and its implications along with ways in which other approaches to researching engagement might help to create more accurate and authentic accounts of the lived reality of work engagement.

THE CONCEPT OF ENGAGEMENT

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since William Kahn first wrote about personal engagement in work. Kahn talked about engagement in terms of the ways people choose to invest themselves in their work roles based on influence and role status, focusing on the conditions that support or impede such investment. Since then, growing interest in the topic has led to the suggestion that work engagement has important implications for organizational performance and effectiveness as well as for individual outcomes, such as motivation and wellbeing.

The momentum behind engagement in both academic and practitioner circles over the past two decades has led some to describe it as one of the most significant management concepts of our time, although others have likened it to a 'fad'. In a recent synthesis of the evidence on engagement

Bailey and colleagues initially identified over three-quarters of a million studies on this topic. As organizations seek to develop their unique bases of competitive advantage, engagement research has widened significantly, with the development of various definitions and typologies. Overall, these definitions derive from the positive psychology field which suggests that engagement denotes particular, positive sets of work attitudes and behaviors towards work, such as energy in terms of vigor, dedication and persistence towards work tasks, and absorption or involvement in work.

The evidence thus far indicates that engagement is positively linked to workers' sense of life and job satisfaction, physical and psychological health as well as their level of organizational commitment. Studies suggest that work engagement contributes to higher levels of task performance as well as promoting discretionary effort, particularly in relation to collaboration, creativity, and innovative behaviors, and to reducing turnover intentions. Engagement is enhanced by certain types of perceived organizational conditions, such as job resources, leadership and other forms of organizational support, as well as being associated with job satisfaction and self-efficacy.

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE ON ENGAGEMENT

Although research on engagement is still expanding, there are gaps, imbalances, and doubts in relation to the evidence. Most of the evidence on engagement is derived from research founded in the positive psychology movement. Critics have suggested that the dominance of certain assumptions with regard to engagement based on this approach means that research has failed to give sufficient consideration to issues of power and social context. Positive psychology is associated with the use of positivistic, scientific methods that privilege

the use of quantitative data collection methods such as questionnaire surveys, and are predicated on the assumption that knowledge regarding engagement is objective and founded entirely in the perceptions of the individual. Being imbalanced in favor of this approach, the evidence does not always reflect the context within which those perceptions arise. Despite the growing body of evidence, it has been observed that what we know about engagement remains somewhat inconclusive while the concept itself may lack consistency. We consider these issues in turn.

(i) The power gap in engagement

The power gap in the underlying approach to engagement is unusual for two main reasons. First, the explosion of interest in engagement is generally attributable to Kahn who defined personal engagement in terms of influence and role status, based on Goffman's earlier ideas of attachment and detachment in role performances. Drawing on this theoretical heritage, Kahn argued that when people engage in work, they invest their full, 'preferred' self in the role, for example through self-expression or mindfulness. In contrast, Kahn argued that individuals disengage from work by withdrawing or hiding their true identity from their role, approaching work in a non-committed, 'robotic' and unvigilant way, disconnected from others.

For Goffman, role performances and the exercise of choice over whether to engage in such performances had even greater social significance. Goffman suggested that roles are performed by enacting certain social values that underpin social position and social mobility. Performances are often 'idealized' or deceptive rather than sincere in order to bring gains to the individual such as distinction, or to distract audiences from the fact that some of us, on the basis of age, gender or ethnicity, do not meet the expectations of our socially preferred selves. This idea can be illustrated with reference to the low-paid jobs often dominated by women (including roles that require caring, empathizing and compassion) that are seen to involve high levels of emotional labor, requiring those who do them to be 'nicer than nice' and exhibit sincerity whatever their own inner feelings. How we choose to present ourselves in work is thus a reflection of our social relations and the power dynamics that shape them. Through their greater focus on behavioral and cognitive orientations to work however, studies of engagement have largely overlooked these aspects of power in organizations.

Second, the gap is unusual because organizational theory has traditionally framed organizations as socio-political systems due to the role played by power in decision-making and in the allocation of resources. Other social science perspectives indicate that power is not just a factor in organizations: organizations are the embodiment of power dynamics. What goes on in meetings, from boards and work councils to staff meetings and even 'dress down Fridays' all reflect positional (status) and dispositional (influence) ideas about power. As a complex concept, power does not lend itself easily to direct measurement, which makes its study problematic. Many studies that do consider power conceive it in idealized terms through its direct or explicit exercise, often in relation to leadership and authority.

Engagement research does suggest that different forms of leadership (such as 'transformational', 'ethical', 'authentic', 'charismatic', or 'empowering' leadership) have positive associations with heightened engagement. However, the majority of these studies do not consider the socially embedded nature of power manifest, for example, in the uneven distribution of power between the leader and the led. Nor do they acknowledge the tacit nature of power, for example, that it is implicitly inscribed in the spatial and temporal flexibilities afforded to the high status role of the knowledge professional as compared to the spatial and temporal constraints of the factory floor worker.

Other studies highlight the way in which leadership and management behaviors — which always embody the particular values of the leader or manager — are important determinants of work orientations, particularly in relation to group identities. These studies also suggest that power is diffuse, making it difficult to observe directly, but it is nonetheless manifest in its uneven distribution, both socially and within organizations. In contrast, engagement research tends to depict leadership in uniform, superficial and even universal terms, as if power is evenly distributed. The very small body of research that does link abusive or destructive leadership to depleted levels of engagement reports only on employee cognitions of negative leadership behaviors without exploring other social or structural explanations, even when such potentially significant factors as gender and age are included in the sample data.

The result is that, with only very few exceptions, most research on engagement has not properly considered the social, contextual, historical or ideological bases which shape people's experiences at work. Instead, the dominant approach to engagement research means that its study has become increasingly disconnected from its theoretical origins in social science. Consequently, the body of evidence on engagement says little about the nature and quality of workplace relationships, the structural conditions that shape them, or the power imbalances that influence them.

(ii) Imbalance in engagement research

This imbalance in the overall approach to engagement research has arisen because of what Godard describes the growing dominance of positivist research as a process of *psychologicalisation,* whereby organizational research has been 'taken over' by the positive psychology movement and its focus on work—management relations, displacing more critical approaches such as sociology that might shed light on the role played by the asymmetry of power relations in organizations for the experience of work engagement.

There are clear indications of the growing dominance of this movement. One of these is how the study of engagement has come to be dominated by a series of psychological theories that evaluate behavior on the principles of rational instrumentalism and utility maximization which do not consider the underlying patterns and limits of people's preferences and choices within a wider social context. This is perhaps most notable in the prevalence of the dominant *job demands—resources* theory through which engagement is often conceptualized as a worker's evaluation of the requirements of work (demands) compared with the resources that are available to