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Understanding active psychological states: Embedding engagement in a wider nomological net and closer attention to performance

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Commentary

Understanding active psychological states: Embedding engagement in a wider nomological net and closer attention to performance

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We concur with the authors of the focal article that engagement is a critical topic at work, and we welcome the questions posed in this article. Nevertheless, we advocate a stronger link between engagement research and existing research and theory about active psychological states, including that discussed in the topic domains of job design/empowerment, leadership, and proactivity/job crafting. We outline the advantages of embedding engagement in a wider nomological net. We also advocate closer attention to type of work performance that is prompted and sustained by engagement, as well as considering how both context and individual differences moderate the link between engagement and performance. We suggest there is more to learn about how, when, and why engagement influences specific aspects of performance.

Keywords: Engagement; Work performance; Proactivity; Job design.

The focal article by Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011 this issue) is a useful analysis on the topic of engagement at work, and provides insightful ways forward. We particularly welcome the conceptualization of engagement as a psychological state (rather than behaviour, e.g., Macey & Schneider, 2008), and the emphasis on engagement as an active rather than passive

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psychological state. We agree with the conclusion that measures of engagement capture some important processes characterized by energy and involvement. We concur too that the concept of engagement is more than a repackaging of related constructs, and as such as powerful and important for our field.

Nevertheless, we should not ignore the place of engagement in a complex nomological net of motivational constructs. Our concern with the article, as we articulate later, is that the authors focus much attention on the specific measure of engagement and neglect research that links similar constructs to major antecedents and outcomes. We fear this approach could result in an unnecessary marginalization of the concept, reducing its wider theoretical impact. Our second concern is that the article does not address the important question of what type of performance does engagement promote and when. We argue for a closer examination of the relationship between engagement and performance. Each of these issues is discussed in turn.

A WIDER NOMOLOGICAL NET

We believe engagement is a powerful concept for researchers and practitioners precisely because it taps into a rich and diverse history of ideas about the meaning of work. If engagement research integrates and builds on these ideas, the field of work psychology is enhanced. Our concern is that too much focus in this review is placed on the "measure" of engagement at the expense of related constructs might help understand the "role" of engagement. Although developing and refining measures is essential, it is also important to distinguish the theoretical idea of engagement from labels and measures.

To illustrate the potential pitfalls, consider some other powerful constructs in the discipline such as stress, justice, and leadership. Each of these constructs references extensive and diverse research literatures to describe fundamental experiences of organizational life. Research in each area is enhanced by good measurement, but is diminished if a particular measure comes to define the experience. A measure should tap important aspects of a construct, but it should not define the domain of research. Engagement research appears to be heading down this latter path.

To address this concern, we call for a broader approach to engagement that recognizes connections with work in other areas of work psychology and organizational behaviour. As we see it, what is especially unique about engagement is that it is an active psychological state. Next we outline examples from the study of job design/empowerment, leadership, and proactivity fields of research that also consider active psychological states, albeit not necessarily with the label of engagement.

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Job design and empowerment literature

The focal article discusses job design research that has examined the specific measure of engagement. We note that there is a much broader job and work design literature that draws on approaches such as social cognitive theory to consider the effect of job characteristics on active psychological outcomes, including self-efficacy, proactive role orientation, activated positive affect (vigour), and meaning (see Parker & Ohly, 2009, for a review). This job design research is more developed than the narrower research cited in the focal article, addressing the determinants of work characteristics, an expanded set of work characteristics (including a renewed emphasis on social characteristics), interactions between work characteristics, relationships other than linear relationships, and dynamic linkages between outcomes and job characteristics (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2008; Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001).

The job design literature also includes intervention and longitudinal change studies that highlight how enriching jobs can lead to active psychological and behavioural outcomes (Parker et al., 2001). Frese, Garst, and Faye's (2007) four-wave study of reciprocal relations is an excellent example, showing that work characteristics influence control orientation (an active psychological state in which individuals aspire to have autonomy over their work) and personal initiative (self-initiated, anticipatory behaviour) and, in turn, that control orientation and initiative shape subsequent work characteristics. Likewise, Grant's stream of field-based innovative intervention and laboratory studies (summarized in Grant & Parker, 2009) shows how increasing job incumbents' feedback from beneficiaries (e.g., having fundraisers receive feedback from scholarship recipients) can enhance employees' feelings of prosocial motivation and increase their positive feelings towards beneficiaries, ultimately leading to higher task performance (e.g., higher funding raised). Although these studies did not use a specific measure of engagement, they and other such studies are theoretically relevant to engagement as a concept that captures "how individuals experience their work as ... something to which they really want to devote time and effort ... as a significant and meaningful pursuit" (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue, p. 5).

It is surprising too that empowerment literature is not discussed. Psychological empowerment refers to the motivational state of experiencing meaning, impact, competence (or self-efficacy), and self-determination (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). At a minimum, we expect psychological empowerment to be highly related to engagement, and one could reasonably ask whether the processes by which job design and related practices influence engagement are distinct from how such practices influence empowerment.

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Job crafting and proactivity literature

The authors propose that "engaged employees craft their own jobs—they increase their job challenges and job resources—in order to stay engaged" (Proposition 7; Bakker et al., 2011 this issue, p. 17). We suggest the proactivity literature can help finesse this proposition. For example, this literature suggests that being proactive and using one's initiative can be psychologically risky, incurring potential resistance from others as well as obstacles that need to be overcome. Therefore, while staying engaged in the long term might be part of the motivation for engagement in crafting and related proactive behaviours, in the short term other mechanisms are likely to be at play. Parker, Bindl, and Strauss (2010) proposed that proactive work behaviours (including, for example, personal initiative, active job crafting, and improving work methods) are influenced by three motivational paths: "can do" (e.g., feelings of self-efficacy, perceived control, etc.), "reason to" (e.g., intrinsic, identified, and integrated motivation), and "energized to". The latter refers to activated positive affect, such as feeling enthusiastic and energetic, and is similar to the vigour element of engagement.

Parker et al. (2010) based their proposition regarding the "energized to" pathway on prior theory and evidence suggesting that positive affect promotes an approach action tendency, and broadens individuals' momentary action–thought repertoires (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998). Positive affect also promotes the setting of more challenging goals and helps individuals engage with a more problematic future. For these reasons, positive affect should enhance the likelihood that individuals set proactive goals. Individuals who experience positive affect are also more likely to strive to achieve proactive goals once set because they are better able to see possibilities, think innovatively, and reason flexibly about tradeoffs. In support of these theoretical arguments, several studies support the link between positive affect and proactive behaviours, such as initiative and active feedback seeking (e.g., Fritz & Sonnentag, 2009). More specifically, drawing on activation theory, Parker et al., proposed that activated positive affect, such as feeling enthusiastic, is more important for stimulating proactive action than is inactivated positive affect, such as feelings of contentment. Preliminary evidence supports this thesis (Bindl & Parker, 2010).

We thus endorse the proposition that engagement, especially feelings of vigour, can promote crafting. However, beyond the possibility that individuals engaging in crafting to stay engaged, we draw on developments in the proactivity literature to suggest that engagement also broadens individuals' cognitive process and prompts and sustains crafting and other such proactive behaviours through this pathway.

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Leadership literature

Finally, the authors asked "Can leaders influence follower engagement?" (Question 5). Yet the role of leadership in motivating individuals at work has been the focus of empirical research for almost a century. Only a narrow view of the engagement concept could lead to the conclusion that "the role of the leader in fostering work engagement has received limited research attention" (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue, p. 13). In contrast, we believe there is a vast amount of research, including meta-analyses, from which to draw to better elaborate the nature and process of this effect. For example, engagement researchers can draw on research in laboratory settings investigating how leaders influence moods (Johnson, 2009), meta-analyses that link leadership to employee motivation (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), field studies of leader impact on empowerment (Pieterse, Knippenberg, Schippers, & Stam, 2010), and theoretical reviews of leadership and identity (Kark & van Dijk, 2007). Of course, leadership research continues to explore additional motivational consequences and the field could benefit from specific studies of engagement. However, it is necessary that new research linking engagement and leadership build on previous research and theory to better cumulate understanding and to build synergies across research areas.

ENGAGEMENT AND BEHAVIOR

The relationship between engagement and performance is addressed indirectly in the focal article. In the introduction, it is argued that the literature has shown "that engagement is related to bottom line outcomes" (Bakker et al., 2011 this issue, p. 5); Question 6 relates to the possibility that team engagement influences individual performance through individual level engagement; and Question 8 considers the possibility engagement can have negative consequences. However, beyond these points, key issues regarding engagement and behaviour are yet to be addressed.

We first note that engagement and positive forms of behaviour are not synonymous (as some have assumed). Thus, engagement does not always leads to high performance, nor does high performance always indicate engagement. For example, an employee might display innovation, not because they feel engaged, but because they fear redundancy and want to prove their capability. Conversely, an employee might fail to show innovation, not because they are unengaged, but because constraints in the environment inhibit them displaying their innovation. Engagement and behaviour must be considered as separate constructs, and a straightforward association between them cannot be assumed. In particular, context can moderate both the extent to which an engaged individual performs well and how they express their engagement. Put another way, the context can affect

what types of behaviour are possible and/ or important. We elaborate this point by describing a model of work performance.

Griffin, Neal, and Parker (2007) proposed a model of performance that integrates across many performance concepts, and that links behaviour to the general requirements of the task environment. This model identifies two features of the work environment—uncertainty and interdependence—that influence the types of behaviours that are likely to contribute to organizational effectiveness. When uncertainty is low, work role requirements can largely be formalized by specifying the tasks that the individual has to perform. Meeting these known expectations is referred to as "proficiency". However, when situations are highly uncertain, it is not possible to anticipate all contingencies to formalize all role requirements; rather, roles emerge dynamically. Two types of behaviour are required in an uncertain environment: adaptivity and proactivity. Adaptivity involves responding and adjusting to changes (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000), whereas proactivity involves anticipating and self-initiating change (Crant, 2000). A further feature of the work environment that influences the relevance of behaviour is interdependence, or the need for individuals to cooperate in order to achieve shared goals (Cummings & Blumberg, 1987). Behaviours that directly contribute to individual effectiveness can be distinguished from behaviours that support the effectiveness of interdependent units such as groups and organizations.

The three different forms of behaviour (proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity) and the three levels at which role behaviours can contribute to effectiveness (individual, team, organization) give rise to a matrix with nine subdimensions of performance. For example, organization member proactivity reflects the extent to which an individual engages in self-starting, future-directed behaviour to change their organization and/or the way the organization works. At the other extreme, individual task proficiency refers to the degree to which an employee meets the known expectations and requirements of his or her role as an individual, which is closely related to the concept of "task performance" (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Griffin et al. (2007) showed that the nine dimensions are distinct, and relate to different antecedents.

This framework identifies performance constructs and their interrelationship in terms of the task environment. The framework identifies distinct kinds of behaviours that might be related to engagement in different ways, but exactly how engagement shapes these behaviours needs further consideration. One possibility is that engagement motivates individuals to exert higher effort across all domains of work behaviour. For example, highly engaged individuals might continue to complete core tasks during very difficult conditions; they might adapt better to changes in their work roles; and they might be more proactive in self-initiating improvement.

A further possibility is that distinct facets of psychological engagement relate to distinct types of performance. For example, absorption might

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motivate effort towards individual core task performance, whereas high levels of identification might motivate effort to the emergent behaviours involved in adaptivity and proactivity. Yet another possibility is particular behavioural responses to engagement might be constrained or prompted by the environment. For example, in predictable environments, engagement might be expressed through effort on core task performance. However, in uncertain environments engagement might stimulate proactive improvement, and in a highly interdependent environment, engagement might promote teamwork and organizationally-directed behaviours. A further possibility, for which there is some initial evidence, is that the "active" emphasis of engagement might be especially important for more active types of performance, such as proactivity (see Bindl & Parker, 2010).

We thus advocate closer attention to the type of work performance that is prompted and sustained by engagement, as well as considering how the context influences the expression of engagement. Individual differences also likely also play a moderating role. For example, performance theory suggests that engaged individuals who lack appropriate knowledge and skills will not perform effectively. Engaged individuals who do not have a good understanding of the broader goals of the organization might not direct their efforts appropriately. There is more to learn about how, when, and why engagement influences specific aspects of performance.

CONCLUSION

We recognize that the constraints of journal space have limited the scope for the authors of the focal article to include some of the wider literature relevant to engagement. However, we believe research into engagement should build on current research and theory about active psychological states. Not only might readers be left with a false sense that the questions regarding engagement are new, but they also miss an opportunity to build a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of important work experiences. Management fads come and go. Engagement too might be displaced by superficial solutions to better management if it is not embedded in a wider nomological net and linked more conceptually to work performance.

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