The Influence of the Occupational Context on Employees' Engagement

Introduction and Research Objectives

Engagement was first theorised by Kahn (1990, p.700) to describe 'the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's "preferred self" in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances'. Engagement is argued, and evidenced, to be important for facilitating high levels of performance, wellbeing and health, particularly during challenging times (Schaufeli, 2014). Thus, it is a relevant topic for discussion on resilience in a challenging world.

Although research on engagement has flourished, there is a growing concern that most studies have not considered the impact of the wider organisational context (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013). This, as Purcell (2014, p.242), argues is 'taking us backwards to a dangerously simplistic view of work relations'. The current study aims to address this concern by qualitatively exploring the role of the occupational context in shaping the lived experience of engagement.

The occupational context refers to the salient characteristics of occupational group the employee belongs to, such as skills, demands, qualifications, and experience. Some studies have highlighted how engagement within specific occupations may be affected by work conditions that are salient within that context. For example, Bakker and Bal (2010) showed that autonomy, performance feedback, and opportunities for development are important for the engagement of starting teachers. Despite this, no studies have compared different occupational groups. Given that Kahn's (1990) original qualitative study highlighted differences between the summer camp counsellors and the designers in the architecture firm in how their engagement was expressed, the occupational context may be a crucial way in

which personal role engagement is experienced within an organisation. Therefore, the first research question (RQ) of this study is:

RQ1: What features of the occupational context are relevant to employees' lived experience of personal role engagement?

Another area to explore is the psychological mechanism that connects the occupational context with engagement. Kahn (1990) argued that meaningfulness, availability, and safety are the intermediary processes through which the wider organisational context exerts its effects on engagement. Meaningfulness connotes the feeling that one' work role is personally valuable, significant and worthwhile; psychological availability refers to an individual's psychological readiness to be engaged in their work role; and psychological safety signifies a sense that one can express one's thoughts and feelings at work without fear of negative consequences.

RQ2: In what ways do meaningfulness, availability safety connect the occupational context with the experience of personal role engagement?

Methodology and Analysis

The research sites

Six medium-sized, UK-based organisations participated in the study: two manufacturing organisations, two professional services organisations, and two public sector organisations.

The manufacturing organisations.   Box Co and Corrugated Co are family-owned manufacturing businesses that produce cardboard packaging for clients across the UK and parts of Europe. Each employs approximately 150 staff, who occupy a range of job roles from low-skilled machine operative job roles to highly-skilled engineering and design specialists through to administrative, organisational, and managerial roles. However, the majority of job roles can be categorised as production roles rather than office/ administrative.

The professional services organisations. Financial Co and Accountancy Co are medium-sized financial services businesses that provide accountancy services including bookkeeping, tax consultancy, and auditing. They both conform to a traditional LLP partnership structure, and employ approximately 250 to 300 staff. There are a range of office-based job roles from client-facing financial service roles to internally-facing support function roles. Although the majority can be considered client-facing roles, there is a significant proportion that are internal support or organisational roles.

The public sector organisations. Council East and Council South are medium-sized local government authorities that provide public services, such as housing, planning, benefits, leisure and environmental services, with each employing approximately 500 officers. There are two main types of job role at both Councils: a) those within the service delivery functions – around two thirds are employed as generalists or specialists within one of the public services provided; and those within the corporate support functions - around one third are employed as generalists or specialists within the corporate area, such as IT or marketing.

Sample characteristics

A total of 151 participants across the six organisations were recruited; of which 124 completed the interview (i.e., 82% response rate). Sub-sample sizes ranged from 16 (Corrugated Co) to 26 (Council East). The interviewees reflected the job role, age, tenure and gender distributions of their respective organisations reasonably well.

Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 124 employees face-to-face at the respondent's workplace. As engagement is a multi-dimensional concept, the interview was structured around each dimension (i.e., emotional – enthusiasm and positivity, cognitive – focus and attention, physical – energy and effort) of engagement in turn. Interviewees were

specifically asked to describe their level of such engagement and explain why they felt that way. A cross-case thematic analytic approach was adopted.

Results

Manufacturing Organisations

A minority discussed how they did not have high engagement due to feeling a lack of overall variety and challenge. Although these individuals felt that their work roles were physically demanding, they felt they lacked intellectual stimulation through the design of their work tasks and the structure of their workdays. These individuals felt 'happy' with their job role, yet they felt 'bored' by the routine nature of their work. This indicates that some employees perceived that their occupational roles did not give them enough varied and challenging work tasks, which reduced the perceived worth and value of the work role (i.e., meaningfulness) due to feeling that the role was stagnant in terms of developing and utilising one's skills and abilities. Another small minority discussed how they did not have high engagement due to feeling a lack of connection with the product they were making and/or with the customers the products were sold to. However, there were a few individuals who did report moderate or high engagement due to feeling a meaningful connection with customers. These tended to be the administration and sales staff who had direct contact with customers rather than those in production roles.

Professional Service Organisations

The majority described how their engagement was fairly high due to the professional nature of the occupation. The occupation as a 'professional services worker' offered a wide variety of challenging tasks that utilised the individual's skills. It was particularly the way in which the occupation was directed towards 'adding value' to clients' businesses that fostered meaningfulness. Moreover, this sense of meaningfulness seemed to be shaped by the

occupational identity of being a 'professional services worker'. It was how this identity was perceived by the individual in relation to their life history, career experiences, and other social identities, that primarily influenced engagement. For some there was a good level of congruence between their 'actual' and their 'ideal' perceived occupational identities. This helped maintain fairly high levels of engagement as the individual felt that their occupational role reflected important aspects of their self-concept. However, for a small minority there was some incongruence or disconnection between their 'actual' and their 'ideal' perceived occupational identities. This made it more difficult for the individual to fully engage because they felt that their occupational role did not completely reflect important aspects of their self-concept. This may have also reduced availability as time and personal resources may have been used to ruminate on this incongruence.

Public Sector Organisations

A large proportion of interviewees described how their engagement was fairly high due to the professional nature of the occupation. The occupation as 'public servant' offered a wide variety of challenging tasks and activities that utilised the individual's skills. It was particularly the way in which the occupation was directed towards helping the local community become more sustainable, and towards 'making a difference' to the lives of the general public, that fostered meaningfulness. Additionally, a significant number of interviewees discussed how they felt intrinsically motivated and a sense of duty as a public servant. This tended to be specific to their area of work that they felt particularly interested in rather than a general drive to work for the 'public good'.

Discussion and Conclusions

Occupational roles that offered the employee a variety of challenging tasks and responsibilities helped foster engagement because the individual felt that their work roles

were stimulating and that their skills were being utilised (Kahn, 1990). It was identified that production roles may not have offered high enough levels of variety and challenge needed to maintain high levels of engagement over the long-term, whereas accountancy and public sector roles provided sufficient motivational job design features needed for engagement. Related to this, occupational roles that provided the employee with regular opportunities to see the direct impact of, and build emotional connections with, the beneficiaries of their work helped the employee feel engaged because it strengthened and expanded the value and purpose of one's work role. It was identified that those who had direct contact with customers had more opportunities to see the impact and build connections with beneficiaries than those that did not (Grant, 2007). Furthermore, occupational identities were particularly salient in professional services and public sector organisations because the types of roles and work activities reflected key features of particular identities. Employees varied in the extent to which they were engaged depending on whether these identities were relevant and congruent to their self-concept, and whether the occupational role was able to fulfil the needs and values of these identities. Thus, individuals seek to have their occupational identities affirmed through the characteristics of their job roles and the values of the organisation (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). Finally, meaningfulness may constitute the core psychological process that connects positive occupational identities and characteristics with the experience of personal role engagement. These findings indicate that engagement theory should consider not just job design and work role fit as key antecedents of meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990), but also salient occupational characteristics and identities that strengthen the work role's status, value and purpose (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

In conclusion, this paper presents a novel qualitative study that advances empirical research and engagement theory by showing how occupational roles and identities shape the ways in which jobs are designed, organised and interpreted, thus changing the extent to which

individuals could engage with their work roles through the psychological process of meaningfulness. It may be useful and interesting to practitioners and the public as it draws on personal, individualised accounts rather than on quantitative survey measures, and in doing so identifies interesting and relatable aspects of the occupational role and one's self concept that are relevant to engagement.

Note: Electronic copy of paper and slides to be made available before conference

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