

Representations of Trait Engagement: Integration, Additions, and Mechanisms

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Trait Engagement Constructs as Expressions of Human Agency

Macey and Schneider (2008) proposed (Proposition 11) that *trait engagement* encompasses at least several personality-based constructs to include an autotelic personality, trait positive affectivity, proactive personality, and conscientiousness. The *first main point of our commentary* is that these personality-based constructs have an underlying commonality, not explicated by Macey and Schneider, in that they all embody differences among individuals in their propensity to exercise *human agency*. The metatheoretical concept of human agency is a key premise of social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001). It describes the ability of people to exercise control over their own thoughts and intentions, which enables people to actively shape their present circumstances in ways that facilitate the attainment of subsequent outcomes they desire. Nevertheless, although human agency is possessed by everyone,

there is individual variation in the extent to which it is characteristically exhibited.

The notion of human agency offers a basis for understanding why the personality-based constructs identified by Macey and Schneider have relevance for employee engagement. First, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of an *autotelic personality* represents a general propensity to mentally transform potential threats into enjoyable challenges. People with an autotelic personality set challenging goals for themselves, become actively involved in endeavors that promote goal accomplishment and skill development, seek developmental feedback, sustain a focus on task performance, and enjoy the state of being mentally involved. Second, *trait positive affectivity* entails a proclivity for active interaction with one's environment (Staw, 2004). Such a propensity would seem to directly facilitate *agency*, which is defined as "the state of being active, usually in the service of a goal, and of exerting power or influence" (VandenBos, 2007, p. 29). Third, the construct of *proactive personality* encompasses consistently taking action to change things for the better and persisting to overcome opposition in doing so (Bateman & Crant, 1993). This construct seems virtually tantamount to an *agentive orientation*, which is "an emphasis on achieving, doing, succeeding, and making one's own mark in the world, which may be expressed through such traits as competitiveness and self-focus" (VandenBos, 2007, p. 29).

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The “agentic” nature of personality-based engagement also qualifies the role of *conscientiousness* as a representation of trait engagement. Some scholars have suggested that conscientiousness encompasses two primary components, *achievement striving* and *dependability* (Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006; Moon, 2001). Achievement striving and dependability differ in that the former involves self-expansive striving (toward excellence or mastery), whereas the latter mostly involves self-restrictive caution and conventionality (Hough & Schneider, 1996). We submit that insofar as achievement striving specifically captures a propensity to exercise human agency, it is the component that qualifies the broader construct of conscientiousness to be a representation of trait engagement. As such, it is recommended that achievement striving be separated from dependability in research on employee engagement.

Finally, the agentic nature of personality-based engagement offers guidance for what other personality-based factors, not included by Macey and Schneider, may legitimately represent trait engagement. For example, *learning-goal orientation* is “a focus on developing one’s competence by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations, and learning from experience” (VandeWalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001, p. 630); this construct has been further described as a tendency to experience intrinsic pleasure from being personally engaged in tasks (Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004). Similarly, *intrinsic motivational orientation* is a propensity to engage in tasks for inherent interest and satisfaction (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994). Another related construct is *locomotion propensity*, which entails a concern with moving from state to state without undue distractions or delays (Kruglanski et al., 2000). Future research might investigate which personality-based factors contribute the most to employee engagement.

General Orientations Toward Work as Complementary Additions

Macey and Schneider suggested that a sense of being personally involved in the work

role, by which one identifies with and is committed to his or her work, is fundamental to employee engagement. However, in considering what attributes of individuals may engender state and behavioral engagement, Macey and Schneider highlighted the relevance of personality-based factors with no mention of individuals’ general, attitude-based orientations toward the world of work. The *second main point of our commentary* is that general orientations toward employed work, in the form of enduring attitudes, would function as unique expressions of trait engagement and thereby complement the personality-based factors described above.

Rokeach (1968) implied that attitudes toward a broad domain of activity (e.g., the world of work) may complement personality traits in explaining how people respond to and experience a particular social setting (e.g., a specific job or organization). In this vein, an attitude may be defined simply as “a response tendency” (Reber, 1995, p. 67) or more elaborately as “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner” (Rokeach, 1968, p. 112). Regarding an attitude as a propensity to respond in a predictable manner is especially relevant when the attitude in question is directed toward a broad domain of activity, such as the world of work in general.

One attitude-based construct that would seem to be an exemplar of trait engagement is *work centrality*, otherwise known as *work involvement* (Cohen, 2003). Work centrality encompasses individuals’ general beliefs regarding the value and importance of work in their lives (MOW [Meaning of Working] International Research Team, 1987; Paullay, Alliger, & Stone-Romero, 1994), and at a conceptual level, it stems directly from the notion of *work as a central life interest* (Dubin, 1956). People who believe that the work role is, and should be, a central part of life would have a strong personal identification with work endeavors. Not surprisingly, work centrality has been designated as an indicator of human capital in the sense of representing an enduring willingness to put

forth effort toward career success (e.g., Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005).

Complementing work centrality, *work alienation* is another orientation toward work in general that we submit as a good candidate for inclusion under the category of trait engagement. Work alienation represents general disaffection toward the world of work in general, which engenders a tendency to psychologically disengage oneself from work activities and settings (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000; Hirschfeld, Feild, & Bedeian, 2000). Notably, research evidence supports the proposition that work centrality and work alienation are distinct aspects of individuals' general commitment to the work domain (Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000). In supporting the relevance of work alienation to employee engagement, Hirschfeld et al. reported that work alienation explained variance in indicators of state engagement that went beyond the variance explained by achievement striving and dependability, with self-deception and trait negative affectivity also taken into account.

Finally, different representations of trait engagement may interact in explaining forms of state engagement. For example, Hirschfeld (2002) found that work alienation moderated the relationship of individuals' achievement striving with their psychological involvement in job tasks. By extension, this finding suggests that individuals' general, attitude-based orientations toward work may be a linchpin of trait engagement in that these factors moderate the relationships of "agentic" personality traits with indicators of state and behavioral engagement.

Mechanisms Through Which Trait Engagement Shapes State Engagement

It is also relevant to consider experiential mechanisms through which relevant traits result in state engagement; such mediators would be placed between trait engagement and state engagement in Macey and Schneider's figure 1. Thus, the *third main point of our commentary* is that the

two categories of trait engagement we delineate (personality based and orientation based) would each be associated with an experiential mechanism that accounts for state engagement. Kahn (1990) enumerated three such mechanisms: availability, meaningfulness, and safety. We propose that trait engagement factors play vital roles in shaping availability and meaningfulness, whereas features of social systems in organizations largely determine safety.

Availability entails a sense of being capable of devoting physical, cognitive, and emotional energies to a work role (Kahn, 1990). As such, availability would stem in part from how people see themselves in terms of their stores of personal resources. Insofar as *personality-based representations* of trait engagement involve perceiving oneself as generally capable and energetic, they should engender greater availability. *Meaningfulness* entails a sense of experiencing personal gratification from the effort one allocates to a work role. Therefore, meaningfulness would stem in part from perceiving work to be rewarding in general. Given that *orientation-based representations* of trait engagement reflect a personal connection to the world of work, they should produce greater meaningfulness. The remaining experiential mechanism designated by Kahn, *safety*, entails a sense of security in expressing oneself in a workplace. Safety is unique in that it would be determined more by elements of social systems than by individuals' own perceptual and action tendencies. In closing, we hope our commentary helps to spark scholarship offering further insight into representations of trait engagement and how they combine with external conditions to shape expressions of state and behavioral engagement.

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