

Title: Engagement: where has all the 'power' gone?

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Executive summary

This article considers the ideas of power and engagement. Since Kahn (1990) 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 wellbeing. 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 (1990) 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 within both academic and practitioner circles over the past two decades has led some to describe it as perhaps 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 et al (2015) initially identified over three-quarters of a million results on the topic using on-line search engines. 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 and suggest 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 so far seems to indicate 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 can contribute 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. It is also suggested that engagement is enhanced by certain types of perceived organizational conditions, such as job resources, leadership and other forms of organizational supports, as well as being associated with other positive psychological states, such as job satisfaction or self-efficacy.

Limitations of the evidence on engagement

Although the field of research into engagement is still expanding, there are some gaps and imbalances in relation to the evidence. Critics have suggested that the dominance of certain assumptions with regard to engagement means that

research has failed to give sufficient consideration to issues of power and social context. Most of the evidence on engagement is derived from research founded in a positive psychology approach. 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, rather than taking account of the context within which those perceptions arise.

(i) The power gap in engagement

The gaps in the underlying approach to engagement are unusual for two main reasons. Firstly, 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 Goffman's 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, studies of engagement have largely overlooked these aspects of power in organizations.

Secondly, 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 sciences perspectives indicate that power is therefore 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 into the spatial and temporal flexibilities afforded to the high status role of the knowledge professional as compared with 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 was evenly distributed. The very small body of research that does link abusive or destructive leadership to depleted levels of engagement report 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 into engagement has not properly considered the social, contextual, historical or ideological bases which shape people's experience of 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 can say 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 some 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 do it. It is an approach that assumes that workers are motivated by the impulse to maximize individual benefits in ways that are predictable and homogenous. It also assumes that personal resources and social exchanges possess a rational value that can be directly and freely exchanged in pursuit of goals, which provide the basis of their evaluation as 'worthwhile' and meaningful to the individual.

However, approaches such as these ignore the point that resources and benefits such as rewards, desirable status or, as Kahn stated, the ability to 'wield influence', are not uniformly available, universally valued, nor consistently motivated. People occupy very specific positions in the social world, largely determined by the personal resources available to them, distributed according to certain patterns and hierarchies, including social class, gender, ethnicity, and so on. These resources include more than just economic resources, but also social, cultural and status-based capabilities that can have both empowering and constraining effects. These include the capacity to use different types of resources to one's advantage in order to respond to different demands in the workplace and beyond. The socially embedded nature of these patterns suggests that workplace demands follow similar patterns of distribution. Research has shown for some time, for example, that people with lower-density social supports in the workplace and older workers experience job strain and the risk of ill-health to much greater extent than others. Even though a significant volume of engagement research identifies the important effect of work-life interference on engagement, the idealized perception of the engaged worker, as someone who offers discretionary effort or is fully absorbed in role, is assumed to be ageless or gender neutral.

Despite their disproportionate representation in lower paid, part time, and often multiple jobs, alongside the demands of family responsibilities, engagement research tends to overlook other perspectives that consider the constraining effects of deep social structures on the socio-economic status of women. As socio-cultural systems, or 'inequality regimes', organizations embody and reproduce gender relations and inequalities; they do not operate outside their social context. In their study, Banihani et al (2013 408) describe organizations as genderizing social systems which function as 'reinforcing arenas' for resource distributions and social hierarchies just as much as other social systems. Yet the underlying assumption of rational preference means engagement scholars in general have overlooked the way in which systematic gender or ethnic differences can affect engagement and shape those preferences. Reported differential rates of engagement between professional (e.g. teachers, nurses, managers, entrepreneurs) and lower skilled (e.g. blue-collar, retail and home care workers) occupations are similarly explained without reference to the underlying socio-economic context of these occupations. Instead these are normally discussed with reference to individual differences. What this suggests is that if we are to develop more complete and accurate accounts of why people choose to invest - or disinvest - themselves in work roles, we need more balanced

accounts of engagement within the realistic contexts of organizations.

A good example of this process of psychologicalisation and the imbalance it has produced relates to the concept of empowerment. Interest in empowerment emerged from the popular political discourse on civic engagement and civil rights in the 1960s in North America to emphasize the importance of citizen self-determination and voice. It swiftly moved into debates about work design and organizational citizenship amid concerns over worker alienation and falling productivity.

The concept of 'psychological empowerment' was developed by Spreitzer in the 1990s, and has since been widely replicated in many studies which show positive associations with engagement. For example, the evidence suggests that where employees feel empowered to influence decisions in the organization, through 'voice' or other power-sharing approaches (such as being supportive or providing increased autonomy), then this impacts positively on reported levels of engagement and negatively on turnover.

It is worth reflecting, however, that Spreitzer's measure was developed from an earlier dissertation on cognitive empowerment that did not reference any social or demographic factors. In her study, Spreitzer reported that the sample she used comprised two groups - the first a group of managers who were 93% male and 85% white, while the second involved

employees, 84% of whom were women, but with no ethnicity data. However, these demographic aspects of the sample were not explored in the analysis. Commenting that her research was 'overly individualistic', Spreitzer's scale of empowerment took no account of diversity, organizational / situational factors, workplace relations (including the fact that most managers were male), or their social, cultural and political contexts in terms of worker self-determination and voice. While the study concluded that there was a need for future research to address these issues, the psychologicalisation of the empowerment concept has meant this has been absent.

The tyranny of the positive

One consequence of this imbalance in favor of the psychologicalisation of organizational research is what Barbara Held has described as the *tyranny of the positive attitude*, due not only to an exclusive focus on positive individual states but also to the presumption that anything that is negative, conflictual or indeterminate lacks virtue, and whose value to organizational goals is uncertain. The emphasis on the positive is seen to have emerged as a result of psychology's historical preoccupation with pathological behaviors. Initially challenged by Maslow and others, many saw the need for a more *humanistic psychology* focused on wellbeing and human potentialities of the whole person, such as self-actualization, rather than deficiencies and maladies.

Growing disquiet with the perceived subjective limitations of the research methods used by the humanist approach led to the emergence of positivist behavioralism in psychological research. While the positive psychology movement first emerged to address the perceived shortcomings of the deficit model of wellbeing, its emphasis on strengths, virtues and resilient behaviors has had some unintended consequences. Notably, these have included the lack of attention paid to the cultural, social and historical realities of work and all the human struggles therein. Although research into engagement has made some important contributions to our understanding of positive attitudes at work, the predominance of the positive attitude may have gone too far. Ironically, it may even give rise to negative implications for our mental health and for organizational performance. For example, some research shows that many of the positive traits usually associated with happiness or well-being, such as optimism, can have adverse effects on health and lead to poor performance, risk-taking, or poor judgment. It is not hard to find evidence at the institutional and organizational levels of what is sometimes called the 'optimism bias', manifest for example in the poor judgments that were made about 'booming' economic markets just before the financial crash. Optimism can also have negative effects at the group and individual levels too. According to Bennett (2015), we live and work in a culture of optimism where powerful institutions 'peddle' the values of hope and

optimism as leading to self-help and happy endings, disguising the fact that the real goal is an acceptant and compliant workforce.

From this more critical perspective, it is argued that engagement can have a 'dark side', whereby the emphasis on the positive value of engagement reflects managerial interests in engagement's potential to subvert worker autonomy and produce greater commitment and effort.

The tyranny of the positive extends to the ways in which certain behaviors are perceived, including workaholism or disengagement, for example. Engagement is associated with the investment of the full self into work, and so there is a fine line between engagement and workaholism, or the over-investment of the self in work. Strategies aimed at generating and rewarding high levels of engagement clearly have the potential to foster workaholism among employees just as much as they do engagement. However, workaholism is problematized such that it is seen as a 'compulsive' desire originating from within the individual, rather than something produced by dysfunctional social / work relations. In this way, the privileged elite can distance themselves from any notion that engagement strategies might lead to undue stress and strain on the part of the worker. Similarly, disengagement is regarded as a personal choice. According to the so-called '30-40-30' rule (the top 30% are highly engaged, the middle 40% neutral

and the bottom 30% disengaged), those in the 30% at the bottom are viewed as unwilling to invest their self into their role and are consequently held personally responsible for their undesirable choice.

The tyranny of the positive in engagement research means that there is no critical mechanism to reflect on the ways expectations of optimism and perceptions of workaholism or disengagement embody dominant values. There is little consideration of how power in the wider social context reproduces and inscribes these values. If almost three quarters of workers are not or do not want to be engaged, surely this is sufficient to question whether the balance towards idealized versions of workers has gone too far.

(iii) Doubts about engagement

A further consequence of the imbalance in favor of positive psychology in engagement research is the widespread use of positivistic methods of research aimed at measuring engagement through responses to a questionnaire survey. Despite the explosion of interest in the topic, and the claimed use of valid and reliable measures of engagement, there are two particular issues that limit what can be claimed about engagement based on methods such as these.

The first is that even though there has been extensive research adopting this positivistic approach and the scales used to measure engagement and associated constructs have been

validated, the findings are often less conclusive than is implied. Current understandings are both tentative and limited because, for all the efforts to emulate the goal of pure science in the pursuit of objective, value-free, and verifiable knowledge, it is simply not possible to fully create scientific - i.e. experimental - conditions in the workplace. Data on engagement are usually generated using cross-sectional, self-report survey methods, captured through a range of scales that measure cognitive and affective states and behaviors. It is an approach that lacks the important element of randomization that is central to experimental research. The cross-sectional nature of many of these studies means that inputs (such as engagement) and outcomes (such as wellbeing) are measured simultaneously, undermining any claims of causality. This is a problem that is endemic in research not just on engagement, but on other attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. Moreover, the extent of variance explained in these studies is usually so small as to lack any practical application. Occasionally, the evidence is conflicting which further undermines the strength of any claims being made. Admittedly, there have been studies that have adopted more complex methods such as diary studies, as well as studies that have been time-lagged or longitudinal, and these carry additional weight in terms of evidence, but they are in the minority.

Secondly, there are doubts about the soundness of the engagement concept itself. The study of engagement has recently come to be dominated by one particular measure developed by the Utrecht Group. The scale is commonly referred to as the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) and, although it is not the only measure of engagement by any means, it has nonetheless been used or adapted in various ways in the vast majority of studies. The Utrecht Group defines engagement as a positive psychological state expressed along three dimensions of absorption, dedication and vigor. Yet there are questions about the way engagement has been conceptualized by the Utrecht Group and concerning whether its constituent dimensions are all in fact essential features of engagement. Some of these questions have been raised by leading members of the group themselves. Others have raised more general doubts about the distinctive nature of the engagement concept, and the degree to which it is distinct from other concepts, such as job satisfaction, commitment or whether it can be conceptualized simply as the opposite to burnout.

There have been a small number of research studies that adopt a more ethnographic or qualitative approach to investigating engagement, not least Kahn's original research, and these studies have proved fruitful in shedding light on some of the organizational realities of engagement, for example raising concerns about the dark side of engagement as a managerial

control strategy. Yet the general lack of an established critical perspective within the mainstream literature means the ways in which power is implicated in engagement has not received the attention it deserves.

Taken together, these gaps, imbalances and doubts raise a number of questions about the probity of overreliance on positivistic approaches to social and organizational research. In seeking to isolate or abstract work engagement from the contextual factors that shape it, what emerges is an attenuated account of the concept that lacks reference to the socially embedded nature of power. This includes, for instance, failing to consider the socio-cultural determinants of the three dimensions of engagement identified by the Utrecht Group. For example, dedication may be associated with orientations to work such as the work ethic; absorption may have an economic imperative and a potential negative affinity with compliance; and vigor may have moral implications, since some may lack the capacity to express this on an equal basis. To provide more complete and realistic accounts of engagement, research needs to be rebalanced to include contextual analyses of organizational realities and be prepared to consider tacit expressions of power in the workplace. This is not at the expense of positivist research, but to provide balance through deeper, richer sociological insights that can help inform and interpret understandings of engagement and the experience of

work. In the next section, we suggest some ways in which such accounts could yield richer narratives of work engagement.

Rethinking power and engagement

Being more critical towards engagement requires a research agenda that reconceptualizes it in terms of organizational and wider social power dynamics. This means reconnecting engagement to its heritage in organizational theory which sees power as fully present in all work relations, processes and structures rather than as an abstract concept, detached from organizational reality. While positive psychology has provided the tools to think about the needs and attitudes of people within work systems, this view alone does not permit consideration of how those needs and attitudes relate to the organization as a whole or how they reflect wider social realities and constraints. From a positivistic perspective, these wider considerations are problematic because the nature of power in shaping them is not readily observable or measurable.

When power and influence in organizations are considered, they are usually associated with their direct and overt manifestations, for example in terms of leadership or authority, often operating within a functional hierarchical framework. The influence of Max Weber's theory of power as 'the production of intended effects' remains very influential, especially given its affinities with leadership 'from the

top'. It is a view that does not account for the latency of power which theorists suggest reflects a very flat, one-dimensional view that focuses only on 'observable' behaviors or cognitions. It is a view that assumes people's preferences and feelings are always evident and overlooks the diffuse nature of power, which operates through the micro-practices of the day-to-day rather than just 'top down'. Thus, power has multiple facets which are often much less evident because they are neither expressed nor directly observable in behaviors, attitudes or events. Foucault argued that a better way to think about power was by reference to a 'capillary' model, which implies that power is embodied into our modes of being, acting and speaking. In this way power is not so much *exerted* in formal, objective displays; instead it is *enacted* within the micro-practices and the wider contexts of work. Others have suggested that this capillary model of power is evident in the ways that things do not happen in organizations, as much as those things that do.

Plugging the gaps: eliciting stories to get more complete accounts of work

One way to start the process of rethinking power and engagement comes from the empowerment debates of the 1960s and 1970s in North America and the work of Bachrach and Bharatz. They famously questioned whether power was always fully manifest in organizations in terms of 'concrete' decision-

making or whether, to understand the effects of power more fully, it was necessary to consider what they termed *non-decisions*. By non-decisions they were referring to the ways those in power use their energies to tacitly 'stack the deck', to ensure that the issues that get talked about are tightly controlled. They argued this tacit expression of power occurs in different ways, but of relevance to engagement is how this relates to the idea of 'employee voice'. What was suggested is that people do not often engage in the ways they would like to either because there is no opportunity to, or because they anticipate a negative response from those in power, or because the system prevents people from articulating their interests in the first place. Alternatively, as has been noted elsewhere, empowering workers to speak is all very well so long as they all speak with *one* voice and say what they are expected to say. How workers behave or feel and what they do say if they speak may be implicitly controlled, perhaps in the way managers do not pay attention to someone when they speak, or refuse to make eye contact when the wrong thing is said, or quietly reward 'idealized' behaviors.

Thus, power may not be directly observable or measurable in the ways preferred by the dominant research approaches but this does not mean it is not present and cannot be evaluated. Understanding these aspects of organizational and social reality requires approaches to research and practice that

delve much deeper into people's lived experience of work, for example using qualitative approaches that build rich pictures of experience, rather than cross-sectional surveys that offer snapshots. In this way, talking to people in depth about their work allows work behaviors to be contextualized in ways that might provide greater insight into work engagement and disengagement.

There are many examples of this type of approach, including Ruth Cavendish's participant observer study of women working for British Leyland and its intersection with issues of ethnicity, nationality and involvement in the workplace. It was a vivid account of how people coped with the realities of work. Similarly, Huw Beynon's ground-breaking study of Ford in the 1970s demonstrated how a rich and detailed account of the organizational context gained by talking in depth to workers and management enabled richer understandings of work relations and work regimes and their effect on worker behavior and activism to emerge. Along with other, similar studies, Beynon's research highlights the importance of using these types of approaches in order to create more realistic accounts of work, including recognizing conflict as an important and determining aspect of work relations within a context of workplace inequalities. Methodologies such as these could help to provide more complete accounts of engagement that

acknowledge the explicit and tacit expressions and enactment of power relations.

Seeking balance through depth

The over-reliance on methods and concepts from positive psychology within engagement research does not reflect the uneven allocation of workplace resources and demands. We suggest that a more balanced approach is needed that ensures workers who are not engaged are not demonized due to the barriers to engagement that arise from social differences. This is a very real concern, since there are examples of organizations that regularly 'weed out' managers whose direct reports do not record sufficiently high levels of engagement in their regular employee surveys.

Anna Pollert's ethnographic assessment of factory work in Bristol in the 1980s provides a provocative example of preconceptions of working class women's experience of work as wives, mothers and workers. Her study looked at women's day-to-day experience of work within its wider social context and, by giving voice to their experiences, revealed how social realities are embodied and reproduced by organizations.

Research like this can help to make invisible realities more visible and uncover the dynamics of power relations at work. Even if the social realities that Pollert wrote about have changed for some since her study was carried out, current research into engagement that takes account of occupational

and social differences is scant, and the inference is that work systems and work regimes are of little importance. Research that emphasizes the relevance of wider social structures and processes for engagement would be welcome. Such research should start from the premise that access to vital job resources, or exposure to detrimental demands, are distributed in ways that reflect underlying patterns of social inequality.

Towards authenticity

Despite the volume of research of engagement, its over-emphasis on the positive has not produced wholly reliable accounts of work realities. Research may fulfill various criteria of scientific rigor, but in stripping out context, it is likely to fall short of providing accurate accounts of engagement and the experience of real, socially embedded people. Qualitative approaches to understanding work can help to provide more authentic insights into its realities. For example, Callaghan's (2001) assessment of HR strategies and tacit managerial control in financial call centers in Scotland explored the tensions that arose when workers were recruited for their natural personalities but trained to 'put on a face' that masked their authentic selves. Given the ways in which working lives are being restructured and intensified through globalization and technology, it is imperative that more research like this re-engages with people's real working

experiences. Quantitative, positivistic accounts may merely be capturing idealized forms of engagement while ignoring the deep tensions in work relations that subvert performance and wellbeing.

The scientific methodology underpinning engagement creates an illusion of fixedness, yet everything in the nature and structure of work is changing around us. This renders our view of engagement as captured through cross sectional snapshots more like an encased butterfly: the outward appearance and shape resembles the real thing, but it is dead. Not only do we need more life-like accounts of engagement and disengagement, we might need to think of the other ways in which people experience it. By over-emphasizing the positive we disregard negative or mixed emotions as sources of appreciation and passion. If a film is harrowing or horrifying, are we necessarily any less engaged with it less just because we cry or are scared? Who is to say that pessimism may not be a more realistic and helpful gauge of organizational engagement or commitment: would that not depend on the context?

Conclusion

In this article, our aim has been to show that while the extensive body of research on engagement has helped to demonstrate its importance in terms of organizational performance and worker wellbeing, it does not provide a

complete or accurate account of engagement in the workplace. In fact, the scientific rigor with which this research has been approached has systematically overlooked the important issue of power and contributed to gaps and discrepancies in our knowledge with significant implications for practice. Research indicates that engagement is good for organizational performance and work-related measures of wellbeing, but it tells us little of the social realities of engagement. By over-emphasizing positive outcomes, research not only fails to account for organizational realities and why some people engage while others do not, it does not account for the processes of engagement and how these are variably experienced by workers. It is more than a passing coincidence that the emergence and dominance of the positive psychology movement and its emphasis on positivist methods of social research in engagement research overlaps with the demise of the in-depth, ethnographic qualitative studies discussed above. The issue of power in organizational research seems to have disappeared as fewer and fewer of these kinds of studies, or the topics they pursue, are perceived as valid and important contributions to knowledge.

We suggest that a fresh approach to engagement is needed which recognizes that the way people engage in work both indicates and reproduces social, cultural and economic differences and how these are unevenly distributed within organizations. For

example, the popular '30-40-30' practitioner narrative about disengagement needs to be challenged because it does not make sense to write off 30% of an organization's human resource capacity and to blame workers for it. Managers need to take greater responsibility for worker disengagement by beginning to ask better questions about why this pattern persists. It is equally important for both practitioners and researchers to begin to question the over-reliance on pulse surveys on engagement that oversimplify work realities. This is not to say there is no place for rapid assessments of organizational health; on their own however, such snapshot surveys cannot provide the kinds of insights that managers need to be able to understand worker disengagement or the process that promote engagement. At the very least, such data needs to be segmented by certain employee categories (gender, age, permanent or temporary staff, ethnicity, etc.) along with data on turnover within certain work units / teams and different work flows, to consider if there are underlying patterns to work relations and what factors might be driving these.

There are many other ways in which managers could try to explore and understand these patterns; for example, using externally-facilitated focus groups that let workers feel able to speak freely and in greater depth about their experiences of the workplace. Such conversations might help managers to identify common aspects of organizational behavior that impede

worker engagement, particularly in relation to socio-demographic factors and work relations. Listening to workers' stories about organizations - whether these are heroic or tragic - can help to better understand how they see the organization and themselves in relation to it. It is important that managers pursue these insights sincerely. Recent research has highlighted that workers may not respond honestly to the kinds of questions asked in work surveys. Instead, they may present an idealized or expected version of their attitudes in the way Goffman described, leading to what Bailey et al (2016) describe as 'existential acting', potentially producing the opposite result to that which was sought. However labor-intensive this may seem, it is a much more efficient use of resources than writing off 30% of the workforce.

Selected bibliography

Our concern about the lack of empirical study into power derives from William Kahn's (1990) seminal article, 'Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work', (*Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4): 692-724). Although the research field on engagement has expanded exponentially since then, a recent synthesis of the evidence concluded that the evidence base for engagement remains both limited and lacking in a well-developed critical approach to engagement. See: Bailey, C., Madden, A., Alfes, K. and Fletcher, L. (2015). The meaning, antecedents and outcomes of employee engagement: a narrative synthesis. (*International Journal of Management Reviews*. doi:10.1111/ijmr.12077). Many of the ideas and claims about engagement are derived from this synthesis.

An important critique of the positive psychology approach is presented by Barbara Held (2002), in 'The tyranny of the positive attitude in America: Observation and speculation' (*Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58: 965-992). This was published in a special edition of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* edited by Held in which she sought to question the underpinning values of the positive psychology movement. A number of other articles in this volume develop ideas about the lost value of the negative much farther than we have. We draw on Godard's (2014) excellent *psychologicalisation* thesis (see: 'The psychologicalisation of employment relations?' *Human Resource Management Journal*, 24(1): 1-18, doi: 10.1111/1748-8583.12030) in which he laments the slow demise of the industrial relations discipline and its greater focus on pluralistic and radical conceptualizations of employment relations, in favor of an 'idealized', hyper-positivist ontology that 'abstracts the subject from human society' (p10).

Our discussion on the nature of power and empowerment is derived from the prolonged and sometimes heated exchange that became known as the *Community Power Debate*, in which *elitist* (e.g. Floyd Hunter's work on 'The Community Elite') *pluralist* (e.g. Robert Dahl's New Haven study, 'Who Governs?') and *radical* (Steven Lukes' book 'Power') perspectives on power were developed from the 1950s onwards. Although the debate concerned the political nature of power and public decision-making, the concepts and insights it generated have been applied to the organizational context by various authors, whose ideas have been drawn on in this article. The analysis by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962), 'Decisions and Non-decisions: An Analytic Framework' (*The American Political Science Review*, 57 (3): 632 - 642) remains an important conceptual contribution to considerations of power and non-decision-making in the organizational context. Spreitzer's

(1995) model of psychological empowerment is explained in: 'Psychological empowerment in the workplace: dimensions, measurement and validation'. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(5): 1442-1465.

We recommend reading any one of a number of brilliant critical and ethnographic studies of organization, including Anna Pollert's (1981) 'Girls, Wives, Factory Lives' (London: Palgrave Macmillan) and Ruth Cavendish's 'Women on the Line' (Oxon: Routledge) first published in 1982. There is a chapter written by Paul Thompson, George Callaghan and Diane van den Broek, entitled 'Keeping up Appearances: Recruitment, Skills and Normative Control in Call Centres' which explores emotional labor in the context of modern work. It appears in Stephen Deery and Nicholas Kinnie's (2004) book, *Call Centres and Human Resource Management. A Cross National Perspective*, (Hampshire: Palgrave). John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood's (1971) study is discussed in their book with Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt, 'The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour' (London: Cambridge University Press). For explanation of different qualitative research methods appropriate to organizational analysis we recommend David Buchanan and Alan Bryman's (2011) 'Sage Handbook of Organizational Research Methods' (London: Sage).

Discussion about the nature and effects of 'existential acting' can be found in Bailey, C, Madden, A. Alfes, K, Shantz, A. and Soane, E. (2016). 'The Mismanaged Soul: Existential labor and the erosion of meaningful work'. *Human Resource Management Review*. doi: [10.1016/j.hrmr.2016.11.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2016.11.001).