Employee Engagement From a Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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Macey and Schneider (2008) draw on numerous theories to explain what engagement is and how it is similar to and different from related constructs in the organizational behavior literature. As a result, we now have a better understanding of some of the key "components" of engagement. What appears to be missing, however, is a strong unifying theory to guide research and practice. We believe that such a theory exists in the form of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and its various corollaries, self-concordance theory (SCT; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), hierarchical theory (Vallerand, 1997), and passion theory (Vallerand et al., 2003). Although Macey and Schneider acknowledged the relevance of SDT and SCT, we believe that much greater use of these theories could be made to justify and extend their conceptual model.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) proposes two overarching forms of motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity for its own sake out of enjoyment and interest. Extrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity for instrumental reasons. Although extrinsic motivation is arguably predominant in a work context, it too can take different forms. According to SDT, extrinsic motivation can reflect a desire to gain rewards or avoid punishment (external regulation), boost one's ego or avoid feelings of guilt (introjection), attain a valued personal goal (identification), or express one's sense of self (integration). Identification and integration involve a high level of volition and, along with intrinsic motivation, are considered forms of *autonomous regulation*. External regulation and introjection involve more external influence and less authenticity and are considered forms of *controlled regulation*. Autonomous regulation, which is also at the heart of Sheldon's concept of self-concordance and Vallerand's characterization of harmonious passion, has been demonstrated to lead to higher levels of performance, persistence, initiative, and creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The concept of autonomous regulation overlaps considerably with Macey and Schneider's conceptualization of *state engagement*. Moreover, the behavioral outcomes found to be associated with autonomous regulation correspond with what they described as *behavioral engagement*. In contrast to

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recent conceptualizations of engagement, however, SDT has been in place for over 30 years, has been well tested in both laboratory and field research, and has served as a guide for training and interventions in a variety of contexts. Although much of the research has taken place outside of the workplace, there has been sufficient application in a work context to attest to its relevance (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Thus, SDT is a theory that we believe can bring together existing conceptualizations and serve as a guide for future research. The following are a few examples of its potential contributions.

Underlying psychological mechanisms. If we are to truly understand how engagement develops, we need more than a list of potential antecedents—we must be able to identify and explain the underlying mechanisms. According to SDT, the key to autonomous regulation is satisfaction of basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. There is good evidence for the universality of these needs, and research shows that lack of satisfaction leads to poorer performance and reduced physical and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, need satisfaction is an important mediator in the relation between environmental influences (e.g., job characteristics, leadership) and autonomous regulation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Therefore, by identifying key mechanisms, SDT can serve as a useful guide for the development of targeted intervention strategies.

What Is the Opposite of Engagement?

Macey and Schneider note that there is some confusion about whether the opposite of engagement is lack of engagement or disengagement. SDT distinguishes autonomous regulation (engagement) from controlled motivation and amotivation (i.e., withdrawal). Each can be measured individually, and these measures have been shown to relate differently to task-relevant behavior (Gagné & Deci, 2005). In addition, there is a third motivational state identified within SDT that can also be contrasted with engagement—reactive autonomy. Koestner and Losier (1996) have shown that people sometimes react to loss of autonomy by rebelling against the source of control. Thus, SDT helps to explain not only engagement but also the psychological states and behavioral reactions that can result in the absence of engagement.

Expanding the Outcomes of Engagement

Macey and Schneider focus primarily on task performance and organizational effectiveness as outcomes of engagement. These are indeed important outcomes. However, SDT research has consistently demonstrated that individuals who are "engaged" in what they are doing also experience greater physical and psychological well-being than those who are amotivated or lack of personal control (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The well-being of employees is important in its own right and also has benefits for organizations in terms of lower absence rates and health insurance costs.

Guiding Measurement

There is currently a lack of consensus regarding the measurement of engagement. For many years, SDT has been used to guide the measurement of engagement-relevant variables (e.g., need satisfaction, motivational states, psychological and behavioral outcomes) in a variety of contexts (e.g., Ryan & Connell, 1989). Vallerand (1997) has shown that motivational states can be operationalized at varying levels of abstraction: global (i.e., dispositional), contextual (e.g., work, education), and situational (i.e., specific activities). Consequently, SDT can readily be applied in the development of measures of the various facets of engagement identified by Macey and Schneider (i.e., trait, state, behavior) as well as various foci of engagement (e.g., job, organization; Saks, 2006). It can also be applied across domains (e.g., work, education, sport) to promote consistency in conceptualization and measurement and facilitate cross-fertilization.

Links to Broader Theoretical Domains

We agree with Macey and Schneider that engagement is distinguishable from general work motivation, commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction, and other key concepts in the organizational behavior literature. However, we believe that the similarities and differences might be more clearly articulated by grounding the concept of engagement in SDT. For example, one of the reasons that Macey and Schneider viewed engagement as distinct from work motivation is that most theories of work motivation focus primarily on intensity without much concern for form. SDT, in contrast, offers a multidimensional conceptualization of work motivation that allows one to differentiate forms of motivation (e.g., controlled vs. autonomous) and their implications for behavior (e.g., effective in-role performance vs. the discretionary and atypical performance believed to characterize behavioral engagement). Consequently, by grounding engagement in SDT, engagement can be embedded within motivation theory where it intuitively belongs. As an added benefit, engagement theory and research can be informed by recent work linking SDT with theories of commitment, leadership, identification, and job design (e.g., Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004).

Limits to the Benefits of Engagement

We share Macey and Schneider's concern that there is a potential for mismanagement of the engagement process (e.g., encouraging involvement at levels that encroach on family time or might be psychologically or physically unhealthy). Another advantage of SDT, therefore, is that it provides a theoretical explanation for the consequences of mismanagement. For example, efforts to build engagement that threaten rather than satisfy psychological needs (e.g., by challenging employees beyond their current level of competence or requiring a commitment that interferes with relationships) should undermine rather than create true engagement. Following SDT prescriptions in the design of engagement interventions should help to avoid such problems.

Conclusions

As Macey and Schneider pointed out, "engagement is a concept with a sparse and diverse theoretical and empirically demonstrated nomological net" (p. 3). We believe that SDT (and related theories) can serve as a much needed unifying framework. By adapting SDT as a guiding framework, rather than "slowly joining the fray," as Macey and Schneider (p. 3) suggested, academic researchers have an opportunity to leapfrog practice to lead new developments in engagement theory, research, and practice.

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