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SUSTAINING EACH OTHER IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: THE ROLE OF WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

A development paper submitted to the Research Methodology Track

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Summary:

This paper explores the role of workplace relationships in engagement and providing a supportive environment in the face of the challenging environment that organisations and individuals face. It draws on the personal engagement literature led by Kahn's work (1990) linked to relational contexts (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014), workplace friendship and relationships (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Winstead et al, 1995) and focuses on how these can best be researched through qualitative methods and diary studies (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Breevaart & Tims, 2019) followed up by interviews. It reports on a research design that builds on Conner and Barrett's discussion of a mix of methods for digital diaries, reflection and interviews to recognise different experiencing, remembering and believing selves required for different functions. Diary entries by the first participants will be by a digital app tailored for the study and launched in June to enable a report of initial experiences and findings in September.

Key words: Workplace relationships, personal engagement, diary studies, digital app, qualitative

Word count: 1973

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Introduction

This paper explores the role of workplace relationships in providing a supportive context for the engagement and wellbeing needed to face the current challenges for organisations, leaders and individuals facing widespread and continuous disruption. The widespread damage from populism leading to increasing uncertainty in politics, potential trade wars and the subsequent economic fallout in the northern hemisphere to the global challenge of AI and robotics create competing concerns of retaining scarce skills and managing insecure and potentially redundant workforces.

The recognition of the importance of relationships in promoting wellbeing, a positive workplace culture and the increasing concerns about the incidence of poor mental health puts a new emphasis on knowing the impact of relationships in organisations. The literature reflects this in focussing on decent, interesting and meaningful work (Kahn, 1990; Kira et al, 2010; Bakker, 2017; Alzola, 2018) in the context of potential disengagement, seen as withdrawal and alienation by Kahn (1990), leading to work engagement's burnout, poor wellbeing, exhaustion by Schaufeli (2014), and work spillover (Sonnentag et al, 2008). More recently the role of workplace relationships has become of interest and conceptualised as resources (Breevaart & Tims, 2019), relational context (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014), mutual concern (Sias et al, 2012) and friendship (Cronin, 2014) to support the values of humanity, empathy and care for the work environment.

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of workplace friendships as a lens to understand the emotional aspects and relational or social contexts for personal engagement and disengagement as well as understanding their role in maintaining meaningfulness and wellbeing in disruption and a potentially disengaged workforce. It responds to calls to understand the social aspects of engagement and disengagement (Truss, 2015) and to distinguish them from other work-related attitudes, particularly whether engagement is a transient rather than an enduring state.

More specifically the research seeks to understand the role of social relationships in the workplace from the perspective of transient interpersonal interactions that contribute to engagement or disengagement and the extent of the supportive nature of the outcomes. The paper reports on the design of research to capture those interactions that help to understand the role that workplace relationships can play in organisations to support the decent, interesting and meaningful work that leads to engagement. The research question asks to what extent do workplace relationships provide the supportive context needed for engagement and wellbeing in organisations?

Perspectives on engagement and disengagement

Kahn (1990) first discussed engagement and disengagement some 30 years ago and the field is now well developed, often in ways that are different of his focus on the person rather than

the employee or the contrasting work engagement perspective (Schaufeli et al, 2002). Kahn focuses on the self-identity that develops from social interactions in which people play roles defined by norms and expectations resulting in personal engagement seen as ‘simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s ‘preferred self’ in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presences (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active full-role performance’ (1990: p. 700). These rely on conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability including physical, emotional or psychological resources. Work engagement is defined as a ‘positive work-related state of fulfilment’ characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption, measured by UWES (Schaufeli et al, 2002). It is predicted by job resources, burnout, or stress, the opposite of engagement, and predicted by job demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) unlike Kahn’s disengagement which occurs when an individual withdraws or uncouples their self from task behaviours for positive or negative reasons (Kahn, 1990). These are further contrasted by the view that work engagement is a state (Schaufeli et al, 2002; Macey & Schneider, 2008) whereas personal engagement is seen as transient (Kahn, 1990).

Engagement has been used by consulting organisations such as Gallup as a more general employee satisfaction approach with elements of work-involvement, enthusiasm and satisfaction, and a focus on outcomes, for example performance and well-being. The well-known ‘best friend at work’ question is a recognition of relational context, although without a theoretical explanation (Harter et al, 2009).

Relational contexts and workplace relationships

The focus on task or work engagement and disengagement and their cognitive aspects (Schaufeli et al, 2002) potentially miss not only the personal aspects but also the inter-subjective importance of emotions and the importance of the relational context: ‘the streams of relationships and emotions that do much to shape how people think, feel and act at work’ (Kahn, 1998:71)

Kahn and Heaphy (2014) highlight the importance of being able to express emotions to support creating authentic relationships and ‘genuine intimacy’ seen as ‘acts of compassion involve caring for others, physically and emotionally enabling them to feel connected to, personally cared for and invested in by others’ (2014:86). These workplace relationships can be viewed as ‘holding environments’ supporting people to establish a sense of identity and belongingness (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014), safe spaces where emotions can be enacted (Cronin, 2014) and encouraging and promoting wellbeing (Winstead et al, 1995). The quality of interpersonal relationships and psychological wellbeing are also impacted by leadership attachment enabling connection, acts of care giving and support (Game et al, 2016).

In the current context of disruption Kahn et al’s (2013) perspective that organisational crises are rooted in engineering models that minimise operational interruption but treat employees themselves as separate from organisations, ignoring social relationships, are particularly salient. He sees that major disruption and crises provide opportunities for growth and individuals working together to fix problems and also ‘to strengthen how they think, work, and learn about themselves, their work, and their environments’ (Kahn, 2013:379).

Workplace relationships or friendships at work

As opportunities to work together arise and form workplace relationships, friendship is of interest to a range of disciplines and has been shown to have beneficial outcomes in organisations, including communication, information sharing and team effectiveness (Berman et al, 2002). They are defined in this context as voluntary and personalistic (Winstead et al, 1995), and typically seen as ‘strong’ relationships, while acquaintances are ‘weak’, which is expanded by Kram and Isabella’s continuum of relationships from the special peer with characteristics of friendship, the collegial peer with whom some personal information would be shared, to the information peer with whom the relationship was weak (1985). Berman et al’s (2002) definition mirrors a continuum from instrumental to affective/expressive and excluding non-inclusive relationships such as romantic intimacy.

The importance of friendship is expressed by characterisations such as the ‘intersubjective spaces’ where emotions and cognitions are woven together (Cronin, 2014), the ‘white spaces’ in the organisation chart (Sias et al (2012) and the organisation’s nervous system (Kahn et al, 2013), which contributes to the creation of meaningfulness, safety and availability and thus underpin both engagement and disengagement.

From the disengagement perspective organisations ignore the informal social structure (Cooper-Thomas and Wright, 2013) and ‘the emotional waterways connecting and disconnecting people’ underneath the cognitive and rational task processes (Kahn, 1998:40). Friendship is one of the social resources that provide support in the face of conditions of emotional exhaustion and burnout and when fearful for the quality of job and future access to resources (Breevaart & Tims, 2019), feelings of marginalisation and misfit (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013) and distressing co-worker interactions (Winstead et al, 1995).

Research design

Our study and topic lend themselves to an interpretive approach, it is exploratory research seeking to understand the phenomena of the workplace relationships that form the relational context (Kahn and Heaphy, 2014) as seen in the momentary interactions and connections that people perceive as signifying support and enhancing meaningfulness, psychological safety and availability. Kahn’s original work on engagement (1990) used grounded theory and case studies, and other studies in the workplace relationships and friendship area have used storytelling (Boje and Jorgensen, 2014), which Sias et al (2004) point out enables individuals to create a structure for their experience and make sense of the resultant emotions and feelings. Cronin (2014) used friendship maps with her semi structured interviews and focus groups would reflect interaction within teams and groups.

A number of studies in this and closely related areas make use of diary studies (Breevaart & Tims, 2019; Cooper-Thomas et al, 2018; Niessen, Sonnentag and Sach, 2012) which equally create a structure for sensemaking. Conner & Barrett (2012) extend them by building on experience sampling methods (ESM) for reporting events immediately in digital diaries via smartphones and apps which has aided improved scientific understanding over memory-based systems. They then further extend this by recognising three different conscious ‘selves’: ‘experiencing self’ operating in the moment reacting to their ‘core affect network’

(Conner & Barrett, 2012:5); remembering/retrospective self, ‘the self through time drawing on their long term memory to consolidate learning, communicate and make decisions; and believing self that reflects the self-concepts and storytelling that maintain identities over time. Balogun and Johnson (2004) also suggest that diaries should be followed up by other methods to encourage reflection on experience events.

The initial design of the study was piloted with a group of MBA students to test a document based diary designed to take account of Conner & Barrett’s (2012) experiencing, remembering/ retrospective selves with a number of daily reports on interaction events (Niessen, Sonnentag & Sach, 2012) over 10 days noting the type of interaction, setting, relationship using Kram and Isabella’s (1985) peer relationship framework, reason for interaction, emotions and feelings arising. This also included daily, end of week and final reflections at the end of the study. The follow up interview built on the remembering and believing self with the questions focussing on their reflections on the different types of peer relations and support they require and received with the diary providing the catalyst to consider the importance of these relationships in their engagement or disengagement and the nature of the moments that sparked those feelings.

The feedback from the pilot has led to seeking and developing an app based diary, which can be used on a smartphone, to allow events to be collected in near real time using emoji’s for emotions felt, the same categories for types of peer relationships, feelings and free text for immediate comments on the event, followed by a reflective review section for the end of the day or week. Few research studies using ESM exist in management, most instances are based in the health sector for patients where Frampton et al (2017) report successful experiences researching employee engagement in rapid time for staff. As well as near real time feedback the app design builds on Frampton et al’s (2017) work to provide potentially collaborative discussion by participants, moderated by the researcher, who can facilitate discussion to enable this to be developed as a virtual focus group and provide a contribution to research methods.

Potential contributions would be understanding the role of relationships with their potential outcomes: understanding what contributes to relationship friendly cultures and organisational support, how they contribute to meaningful work and the support needs from organisations especially in times of major disruption. The contribution to engagement theory would come by holistically examining the individual within their social context and understanding the momentary interactions that spark engagement or disengagement.

Next steps

Recruitment to the main study is underway drawing the sample from members of a practitioner-based organisation which includes government departments and agencies, charities, financial services and utilities sectors. The first organisation is from the government sector facing the challenge of the disruption from the possible UK exit from the EU and a further two organisations are currently in discussions on providing participants. The study will use a sample of volunteers from 40 team members in a number of locations to keep diaries over a period of three weeks starting mid-June and to be interviewed over the summer

building on their reflective reviews. The conference discussion will centre on the experience of the diary method using the app and its potential contribution to research methods.

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