Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **1** (2008), 48–51.
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Is Behavioral Engagement a Distinct and Useful Construct?

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It is not surprising that employee engagement is a popular idea. A workplace where enthusiastic team members devote extra effort to innovation, cooperate with each other, and effectively adapt to change is an enticing picture for managers and employees alike. It makes sense to describe such employees as engaged with their work. But is it useful to propose that there is a distinct form of a behavior—termed "behavioral engagement" by Macey and Schneider (2008)—that can and should be distinguished from other forms of behavior? We suggest not.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a proliferation of partially overlapping constructs that seek to explain different forms of work behavior that are important for organizational success. Although the specific behaviors described by these constructs are important, researchers have noted the lack of a framework for integrating the diverse range of performance constructs that now exist (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Macey and Schneider introduce "behavioral engagement" as another such construct. Unfortunately, we believe this approach will add to the number of performance constructs without overcoming the barriers to a better conceptual integration among the constructs.

Concerns With Behavioral Engagement

Our first and general concern is that the concept of behavioral engagement implies that a particular motivational process (engagement) underpins a particular set of behaviors. This connection is problematic. An employee might display innovation, which the authors consider a facet of behavioral engagement, not because they feel engaged but because they fear redundancy and want to prove their capability. Conversely, an employee might fail to show innovation, not because they are unengaged but because constraints in the environment inhibit behavior. Because all behaviors are multidetermined, it is not possible to link a specific form of behavior with a specific motivational state.

This point is illustrated by Macey and Schneider's example describing some situations where normal task behavior is defined as behavioral engagement and other where it is not depending on the level of demand in the context (p. 25). The problem here is that the context determines whether psychological engagement is inferred to

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2007.00007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

cause the behavior or not. However, the conceptual features of this context and their relationship to engagement remain unspecified. Ultimately, although psychological engagement is likely to prompt certain types of behaviors rather than others, defining these behaviors as engagement causes more problems than it solves. We recommend behavioral constructs that are congruent with features of the work context and that recognize the equifinality of motivational outcomes.

Our second set of concerns is more specific and relates to the particular way that behavioral engagement is defined. Propositions 7, 8, and 9 relate to innovation, citizenship, and role expansion, respectively, and define behavioral engagement as "going beyond" standard or typical expectations. Going beyond what is typical or usual is used by Macey and Schneider as an alternative to the concepts of discretion and extra-role for defining different forms of behavior. We agree that there are several problems with defining forms of behavior in terms of discretion and extra-role. For example, the boundaries between in-role and extra-role are weak at best; definitions vary according to observers; the extent to which the behavior is discretionary is not clear; and motivational states influence what is perceived to be in-role. However, we suggest that similar issues apply to behaviors defined in relation to going beyond what is expected. Whose expectations are critical? What if the behavior comes to be expected over time? What if there are conflicting expectations? Where do expectations arise from? These are all legitimate questions, which are important for understanding engagement and motivation. However, answering these questions does not help to define a particular form of behavior.

Our final set of concerns relates to the fourth proposition that behavioral engagement "is adaptive behavior intended to serve an organizational purpose, whether to defend and protect the status quo in response to actual or anticipated threats or to change and/or promote change in response to actual or anticipated events" (p. 18). This definition is overly vague and can encompass a wide range of behaviors at an unspecified level. The definition also combines adaptivity and proactivity, which we, and others (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001), see as distinct.

Alternative Framework

We propose an alternative way to categorize forms of work behaviors (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007) that encompasses the behaviors described as facets of behavioral engagement. Our model of performance is derived from similar sources to those reviewed by Macey and Schneider, including studies of contextual performance and citizenship behavior (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993); adaptive performance (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000); and proactive concepts, such as proactivity (Crant, 2000), taking charge (Morrison & Phelps, 1999), and personal initiative (Frese & Faye, 2001). We extend previous approaches to work performance by distinguishing forms of behavior in relation to the general requirements of the task environment. In particular, we identify two features of the work environment that influence the types of behaviors that are likely to contribute to organizational effectiveness, namely uncertainty and interdependence. Below we explain this approach and draw out some implications for the topic of engagement.

Uncertainty occurs when the inputs, processes, or outputs of work systems lack predictability. When uncertainty is low, it is possible to formalize the requirements of work roles by specifying the tasks that the individual has to perform and the procedures they must follow. We refer to meeting these known expectations and requirements of his or her role as "proficiency." When uncertainty is high, however, it is more difficult to formalize role requirements because it is not possible to anticipate all contingencies. In this case, roles emerge dynamically. Two types of behavior are required in an uncertain environment, namely adaptivity and proactivity. Adaptivity involves responding and adjusting to changes, whereas proactivity

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2007.00007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

involves anticipating and creating change. Therefore, over and above what we refer to as *task proficiency*, we identify adaptivity and proactivity as important forms of behavior, especially given increasing uncertainty in many organizations.

Interdependence is the second feature of the work environment that we used to identify forms of behavior. Interdependence occurs when individuals need to cooperate in order to achieve shared goals. Thus, behaviors that directly contribute to individual effectiveness are distinguished from behaviors that support the effectiveness of interdependent entities such as groups and organizations. All organizations involve interdependence to some degree but will vary in degree for many reasons. For example, behaviors such as supporting team coordination are likely to be more important when tasks involve high interdependence among team members.

In our model, we cross-classify the three different forms of behavior (proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity) and the three levels at which role behaviors can contribute to effectiveness (individual, team, and organization) into nine subdimensions of work role performance. For example, individual task proficiency refers to the degree to which an employee meets the known expectations and requirements of his or her role as an individual, which is closely related to the concept of "task performance." At the other extreme, organization member proactivity reflects the extent to which an individual engages in self-starting, future-directed behavior to change their organization and/or the way the organization works. The nine dimensions are theoretically distinct and predicted by different antecedents.

Our framework identifies performance constructs and their interrelationships in terms of the task environment. This approach avoids the main problems of defining behavioral engagement as an expression of psychological engagement. The different forms of behavior are also not defined in terms of the expected level at which the behavior should be performed. Therefore, it is not necessary to invoke the concept of "going beyond" to define them. We suggest that it is simpler to state that "high levels" of performance of a particular form are desirable or important for an organization. The level of a behavior (e.g., high level, going beyond expectations, extra-role) is not necessary for defining the form of behavior.

Psychological Engagement and Behavior

Although we argue that behavioral engagement is not a distinct aggregate construct, psychological engagement might prove a useful construct for identifying psychological antecedents across the broad performance domain. We suggest that Macey and Schneider's propositions about behavioral engagement can be extended by linking distinct facets of psychological engagement to the broad performance domain rather than an aggregate group of behaviors and by considering the dynamics of the process. For example, absorption might motivate effort toward individual core task performance, empowerment might motivate effort toward the emergent behaviors involved in adaptivity and proactivity, and commitment to the team or organization might motivate behaviors directed toward team and organizational effectiveness.

Furthermore, as noted by Macey and Schneider, psychological engagement is an energetic state that is likely to have substantial variability over the course of a day, week, or month. The extent to which a given class of behavior might respond to fluctuations in psychological engagement may be constrained by the environment. In highly regulated predictable environments, increases in engagement might be expressed through greater effort on core task performance. In highly uncertain environments, increases in engagement might motivate proactive behavior. In highly interdependent environments, increases in engagement might produce greater teamwork or organizationally directed behaviors. Of course, uncertainty and interdependence are themselves dynamic constructs, and thus, changes in psychological engagement may interact

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2007.00007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

with changes in uncertainty and interdependence. This kind of specificity is a useful advance in conceptualizing links between motivation, work performance, and the work environment.

We believe there are two important questions about engagement and effort that need to be addressed to build a better picture of the link between engagement and behavior. First, how do those factors described as psychological engagement motivate individuals to exert higher effort across the broad domain of work behavior? For this first question, the distinction between forms of behavior is not critical; it can apply to any organizationally relevant behavior, including core tasks. Macey and Schneider propose that engagement motivates effort of this kind in Proposition 8.

Second, how does engagement motivate the allocation of effort to different forms of behavior, and why does the allocation of effort to different forms of behavior change within individuals over time? For example, why do individuals put in effort to innovate (Proposition 7), take on new tasks (Proposition 9), or adapt (Proposition 10)? For this question, the distinction between forms of behavior is more important. However, as we have argued, the construct of behavioral engagement does not provide a categorization of behavior that allows systematic distinction among different types.

In summary, the construct of behavioral engagement seeks to capture the consequences of an active motivational state in distinct behavioral forms. We believe that the construct cannot meet this goal because active states can motivate effort toward any part of the performance domain. There are reasons to think that some behaviors are better motivated by psychological engagement than by other mechanisms such as extrinsic reward. For example, displays of initiative and acts of support for team members might be influenced by both psychological engagement and financial incentives. However, the construct of psychological engagement itself does not help to define a set of behaviors that can be termed behavioral engagement.

Conclusion

The behaviors that might be influenced by psychological engagement comprise most of the domain of positive work performance. These behaviors have multiple motivational determinants and cannot be mapped to a single behavioral framework. Conceptually, the construct of behavioral engagement adds another performance construct to an already long list. The construct includes a range of important behaviors but it does not help to understand how these behaviors systematically differ from other forms of behavior. Practically, the construct of behavioral engagement might not provide an effective way to support and manage the benefits of active psychological states. For example, in performance appraisal, we suggest that evaluating employees on the degree to which they exceed expectations will be less useful than simply evaluating the degree to which employees enact specific types of behavior that are valued by the organization.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2007.00007.x Published online by Cambridge University Press