

RELATIONSHIPS WITH WORK: TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY

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The emergence of job burnout as a cultural phenomenon in the 1970s focused attention on ongoing cognitive and emotional states that people experience in their worklife. Over the following three decades, extensive multidisciplinary research around the world has confirmed that burnout is not limited to human service professionals in the USA, but is indicative of fundamental qualities of the relationships individuals develop with a primary social context: their worklife. Recent work exploring the positive antithesis of burnout has emphasized qualities that underlie both the distressing experience of burnout and the fulfilling state of work engagement. At their positive extremes, these qualities have the potential to explain innovation and initiative at work.

The three-part structure of the primary burnout measure, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, points towards the fundamental qualities that shape individuals' experience of worklife: energy, involvement, and efficacy. A dearth of these qualities defines burnout as exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Their abundance supports work engagement. The original description of work engagement (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) considered the absence of exhaustion and cynicism to be a sufficient condition for work engagement; a subsequent operationalization (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) argued that explicit evidence of vigor and dedication was essential conditions. The two approaches concur that individuals' subjective state of energy, their capacity to become involved in their work, and their sense of efficacy are defining qualities of the psychological experience of worklife.

Research on burnout and work engagement has emphasized interaction of individuals with their organization. Relationships with work are defined partially through the workplace demands, resources, and corporate values. Employees both respond to defining qualities of the work environment and contribute to the future development of that organizational environment. A theory of cognitive and emotional experiences at work is not solely about individuals; it is about an ongoing relationship of individuals with their social environments.

These qualities are building blocks of a theory of relationships with work. This presentation considers the development of theory that encompasses a full range of workplace experiences. One step in building the theory is considering the relationships among the components. The presentation extends the framework beyond current concepts of burnout and work engagement to consider exceptional contributions at work, such as innovation and initiative at work. The theory proposes that exceptional contributions occur in the context of congruence on personal and organizational values. That is, individual qualities of energy, involvement, and efficacy provide only one condition for innovation. A second critical condition is the fit of individual aspirations with organizational policies, objectives, and values. To encompass exceptional contributions at work, or beyond work as in entrepreneurship, the theory goes beyond the core qualities of energy, involvement, and efficacy. It considers individual career aspirations in greater detail to address personal values supporting performance beyond the reasonable requirements for job performance. It also considers in more detail the organizational or socio-economic context for policies, cultural norms, and practices that influence innovation and initiative.

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